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The actress was murdered...

BY GERALD TOMLINSON



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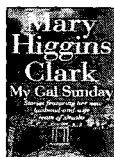
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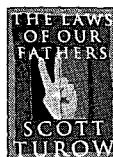
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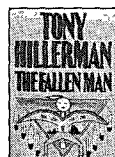
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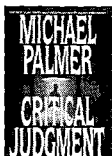


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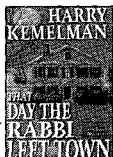
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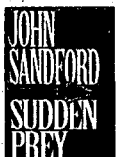
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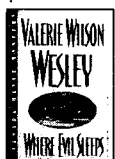
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Gerald Tomlinson, author of our cover story "The Orange Star," was first published in AHMM in the February 1978 issue with a story called "The Flight of the Sparrow" (several years after he had begun writing stories for our sister magazine, EQMM) and subsequently published three more stories in our pages, the last one in 1980. Consequently, we enthusiastically welcome him back—and "The Orange Star" is a delight.

On the other hand, Bill Knox, author of "The Secret Grave," is new to our pages altogether, and of course we are pleased indeed to have him join us. Mr. Knox, a Glaswegian, has the distinction of being the only Scottish resident member of the Mystery Writers of America; he

is the author of some sixty crime novels, many published in this country by Doubleday. His most recent novel is *The Counterfeit Killers* (Constable, U.K., 1996).

To his books Mr. Knox brings his considerable experience as a print and television police reporter. He has "worked closely with various U.K. police forces in various projects" and is the recipient of an award from the *Police Review*, a professional police journal, for the best portrayal of police procedures in U.K. fiction.

Welcome also to Mary Goudin, whose "The Perfect Wife" is her first published story. A native of Tucson, Ms. Goudin works as an administrator in local government. She likes to work math and logic puzzles.

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FICTION

The Orange Star

Gerald Tomlinson



Illustration by Andrew Trabbold

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/97

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Bosley-Munn wanted him to write Peggy Thayer's life story. The Manhattan publisher offered a modest advance, too modest for Fred Slocum to brag about even at the Raven Bar, his hangout on upper Broadway. But Peggy Thayer's career had been pretty modest, too, after her brilliant wartime debut.

Peggy blazed her way to stardom as the vivacious leading lady, blonde and captivating, in the 1940 film hit *Folderol*. She won an Academy Award nomination for it, but the Oscar that year went to Ginger Rogers. Oscar or no, the studio heads at Apex Pictures fawned over Peggy's beauty and her glittering future. Leggy Peggy they called her. Still in her early twenties, she had a casting-couch body and the face of an angel. If she occasionally flubbed her lines, well, so did Betty Grable, didn't she?

Apex hyped Peggy Thayer with all the publicity ammo in their arsenal. But when they tried to get a *Folderol*-level performance out of her in her next film, *Stuff 'n' Duffl*, a wartime extravaganza released in 1943, they came a cropper. Ginger Rogers she wasn't. The film sank like the *Bismarck*, torpedoed by the erratic performance of its star. Three years later she starred in *Boppity Boo*, a come-

dy set in Miami Beach. Billed as Peggy Thayer's comeback triumph, it bombed, costing several executives at Apex Pictures their jobs. After that they (the they who were left) put her in a succession of low-budget horror films.

Finally, early in the 1960's, the studio heads gave up on Peggy Thayer, and she on them. Peggy moved to New York and tried the Broadway stage. She stumbled again, veered to off-Broadway, where she also laid an egg. Her early sense of the glory of acting gave way to quiet desperation. Her curvaceous body turned to cellulite. She appeared in an occasional off-off-Broadway show, to little publicity and less acclaim. Peggy Thayer, cynics whispered, was a comet whose only asset had been her lovely tail. It was a cruel epitaph.

With her career in the tank, she sought solace in her cups. Although Peggy's boozing turned into an all-day habit, her fierce pride kept her from downing more than a fifth between sunup and lights-out. Well, sometimes a quart, later a liter. This habit did nothing to improve her appearance. A puffy face, swelling girth, and liver spots prompted her to give up not Bushmills, as her doctor suggested, but mirrors.

As disappointing as she'd been

to the major players at Apex Pictures, not to mention a clutch of Manhattan stage producers, Peggy's one great hit had attracted a number of loyal, long-term admirers. Among them was Jasper Cass, a blow-dried weasel who had risen from the mean but clean streets of Thunder Bay, Ontario, to become editor-in-chief at Bosley-Munn. Under Cass's editorial direction, the publishing house churned out everything from Pulitzer-bound belles-lettres to unbridled schlock, with the schlock paying the bills.

Another Peggy Thayer fan was freelance writer Fred Slocum himself, a native of Flushing, Queens, who fell in love with Peggy when he first saw her in the *Boppity Boo* floppity-floo. Eighteen at the time, Slocum went on to study journalism at NYU, then hopped from job to job on a string of Long Island dailies. Along the way he carved an unusual niche for himself in the book-writing game, doing quickie biographies of ex-celebrities who suddenly resurfaced in the news, usually by dying.

Thus, when Peggy Thayer, once hot, now not, was found lifeless in her Charles Street walkup, stabbed to death for no reason, other than robbery, that anyone could fathom, Jasper Cass phoned Fred Slocum.

"It's bio time again, Freddie boy," Cass boomed cheerily. "Our favorite actress got whacked last night."

Slocum, a Thayer fan in equal mourning, alerted his agent. They met at Pizza Regal on upper Broadway, and over slices with pepperoni and mushrooms the aging but still lightning-penned Fred Slocum prepared to switch from semi-retirement to interview mode.

On the surface the murder of Belfast-born Peggy Thayer looked simple and sordid, a West Village robbery-homicide. The victim, blared the tabloids, was an icon of the American screen, a still-ravishing beauty who lay slashed to death amid a scattered array of her well-thumbed scrapbooks. Once radiant in key lighted black-and-white movies and pinup stills (the *Post* printed one of her early studio portraits the size of a Miró mural), Peggy Thayer had become in later years, they said, a dim memory from a bygone era of Hollywood.

The obituaries touched on Peggy Thayer's vocal and long-standing contempt for Marilyn Monroe. In the 1950's, Marilyn, three years younger than Peggy, achieved the superstar status so confidently predicted for the lovely *Folderol* doll. "It's frustrating, it's cruel," Peggy told a gossip columnist, "to be a

dedicated actress struggling in the shadow of a tongue-tied, neurotic bitch goddess like *her*." But as the *Mirror* noted, "Peggy failed, Marilyn prevailed."

The next morning, Fred Slocum hailed a cab outside his West 103rd Street apartment. "Charles Street and Hudson," he growled. At nine o'clock the July sunlight was already beginning to warm the city streets.

At the still-bustling crime scene Slocum elbowed his way toward a TV news crew doing a follow-up on the Thayer murder. He recognized correspondent Mia St. Fleur, a thirty-something favorite on Channel 11's six o'clock news. Mia, a tall, willowy redhead, looked as sassy as her name. She and Fred had met a year ago when both were following up on the Brother of Beelzebub killing in Brooklyn. This morning she was puffing furiously on a cigarillo.

"Hi, Mia," he said. "Are the cops booking the butler?"

"Butler?" Mia hooted. "Leggy Peggy didn't have enough money to buy a bagel with a schmear."

"And yet she was once a big star," Slocum mused in a fatherly way.

"So was Veronica Lake. She ended up waiting tables."

"You're saying Peggy was broke? In this neighborhood?" Slocum glanced around. Charles

Street was not the low-rent district.

"So they say, Freddie. The thieves got zip, apparently. Funny, though, her lawyer claims he found a huge gem of some kind in her safe deposit box at Muni-Bank. One enormous jewel the size of a golf ball. Unmounted. Priceless."

"Say that again, Mia."

"Catch me at six, Freddie. I've got to run."

At five fifty-nine P.M. Fred Slocum leaned back in his easy chair, punched the remote, and a minute later watched Mia St. Fleur deliver her TV message to the multitudes.

"This is where Peggy Thayer spent her last days," Mia intoned, motioning toward the Charles Street walkup. "Peggy Thayer was once a highly acclaimed film star, nominated for an Oscar in 1940 for her role as Mitzi in the box-office smash *Folderol*. But Miss Thayer's life thereafter was a series of unrealized dreams. Her later theatrical efforts were generally unsuccessful. It all ended last night at the hands of a brutal killer or killers. Peggy Thayer, who never married, was stabbed to death here, in her small apartment on Charles Street, amid the memorabilia of her screen career."

Mia St. Fleur waved once again at the plain brick apart-

ment building. Then a glamorous studio photo of Peggy Thayer appeared on the tube, and the willowy reporter's words continued in a voice-over:

"Mystery surrounds the World War II screen star's death. Police suspect the motive was robbery but have no leads at this time. One unusual note—Channel 11 has learned that while nothing of value seems to have been taken from the apartment, Miss Thayer, at the time of her death, had in her possession a priceless gem known as the Star of Rangoon. This gem, discovered in Burma in 1894, is an orange star sapphire. According to her lawyer, Bernard Katz, the sapphire, unmounted, was found, alone and unexplained, in Miss Thayer's safe deposit box at a midtown bank. The Star of Rangoon is the third largest orange star sapphire known to exist."

Slocum thumbed through the yellow pages the next morning, checked off seven Manhattan lawyers named Bernard Katz, and resolved to phone them in order until he found the right one. The person who answered his fifth call was not Bernard Katz himself, judging by the purring voice, but one of his kit-tens.

"Hello," said she. "I'm Sandy Teitelbaum, of Bernard Katz and Associates. Can I help you?"

"Yes," Slocum said. "You can tell me who's going to inherit the Star of Rangoon." The line had brought derision, denials, or both on the first four tries.

But this time the voice elided from cheery to suspicious. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"Oh, come on," Slocum wheedled. "Sure you can. I'm writing a biography of Peggy Thayer for Bosley-Munn. The book won't be out for months, and by then everybody on both coasts and in fly-over country will know the name of the heir. But me, I've got to know right now who stands to inherit the orange sapphire. So if you know who it is, Sandy, just tell me. Okay?"

"Will I get credit in the book?"

"Sure."

"And a free copy? Auto-graphed?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay. My name is Sandy Teitelbaum. That's T-e-i-t-e-l-b-a-u-m. My address is 234 West Carman Street, New York 10003. Could you sign the book, 'To Sandy for all her help. Love—' And then write your name . . . whatever it is." She paused to catch her breath. "You got that?"

"Got it. And my name is Slocum. Fred Slocum. The guy who wrote *Whatever Happened to Chester Morris?*"

"Fine. Who? Anyway, the lucky heir who gets the orange

sapphire is Harold Halloran. H-a-l-l-o-r-a-n. He lives in Lucent Springs, Florida. That's all I know."

But there was plenty more to know as it turned out. No sooner had news of the Star of Rangoon hit the streets than the skinny about it hit the fan. The priceless gem evidently didn't belong to Peggy Thayer at all, even if it had been stashed in her box at the bank ever since Americans began to like Ike, as her lawyer maintained.

The last recorded owner of the Star of Rangoon was Gaylord S. McKnight.

Yes, *the* Gaylord S. McKnight. "McKnight in Shining Armor," his campaign posters had called him. The man who, in 1948, as governor of New Jersey, yielded his favorite-son status and threw his support to Dwight D. Eisenhower, a timely move that earned him a cabinet post when New Jersey voters retired him from the statehouse.

The man about whom *Time* magazine had raved in 1947, "If looks count for anything in politics, Governor McKnight should make the White House his home one of these days. Tall, craggy, and intense, a man who can dominate a room by his mere presence, he is more Presidential in visage and bearing than any aspirant to the Oval Office since Charles Evans Hughes."

No one as famous as ex-Governor McKnight could keep his whereabouts hidden, and Fred Slocum quickly learned McKnight's current address. He lived in a retirement community called Franciscan Pines in Preston Hills, New Jersey. His wife, who was still living, shared the same address.

Slocum climbed aboard a bus at the Port Authority terminal, bound for the Garden State's fox-and-hound country. A hurried reporter would have phoned, but Slocum wanted to show up in person on the great man's doorstep. According to the information in *Who's Who*, Gaylord S. McKnight was now eighty-eight years old, his once bright hopes for the Presidency decades behind him.

Preston Hills looked much like any other upscale town in central New Jersey, which is to say quasi-colonial. As Slocum alighted from the bus, he wondered how far Franciscan Pines was from the bus stop. Not too far, he hoped. Slocum was used to seeing a throng of yellow cabs jockeying for position and passengers. Here he saw no cabs at all.

In a drugstore near the bus stop he asked, "Where is Franciscan Pines?"

A slim, bespectacled girl behind the counter pointed vaguely past his left shoulder. "Half a

mile or so on Blue Pond Road. You can't miss it. I mean, you really can't."

Fred Slocum set out on foot. The air smelled fresh. The sun blazed down. After a few hundred yards the sidewalk ended, and pedestrians and joggers had to edge out onto the winding two-lane road. When Franciscan Pines at last came into view, Slocum stared at it in astonishment. Stark white against an azure sky, the main building with its four tall Doric columns at the entranceway looked like a five-star resort hotel, The Greenbrier perhaps, rather than a retirement community. As Slocum strolled through the front gate, a silver Mercedes minibus sporting an emerald green "Franciscan Pines" logo, overtook him and headed down the long, shaded path that led to the front entrance. A gray Rolls-Royce sedan piloted by an elderly woman followed the van in. On the path Slocum found himself engulfed by a botanical garden of trees, shrubs, and flowers.

The opulence of the setting notwithstanding, the Franciscan staff welcomed Fred Slocum with down-home cordiality. He was perspiring freely from his walk, but the staff pretended not to notice. "Mr. McKnight? Who shall I say is calling?" And as Slocum had hoped, a few minutes later Gaylord S. McKnight,

no longer in shining armor but in pressed khakis and a teal polo shirt, emerged from the elevator and approached, smiling warily, his step sprightly.

"Mr. Slocum? The writer who's going to do Peggy Thayer's biography?" McKnight's voice resonated with authority, although his position no longer commanded it. He still had sources, though, for there was no other way he could have known of Slocum's connection with the Thayer project, or even that there was a Thayer project.

"Hello," Fred Slocum said, respectful of age and achievement but unawed by the legend facing him. "I understand you're still the owner of the Star of Rangoon."

The old gentleman seemed slightly taken aback by the lack of small talk, but he responded with calm courtesy. He stood straight as a tentpole, still handsome, making no move toward any of the plushly upholstered chairs under the vaulted ceiling in the lobby.

He said, "Bernie Katz is a bit of a publicity seeker, I'm afraid. He knows perfectly well the sapphire belongs to Peggy Thayer. It's been hers for more than fifty years. I gave it to her as a gift, but neither of us wanted that fact publicized."

"Why?"

The ex-governor took a deep

breath. "Fred—can I call you Fred?—there's no way for me to keep the secret any longer. My wife Grace has never known about the Star of Rangoon. But she's in failing health, and I don't think the news will affect her now one way or the other."

"Peggy Thayer was your mistress," Slocum said, making the obvious inference. "You were in love with her."

McKnight took Slocum's arm in a remarkably firm grasp and steered him toward a small enclosed library off the lobby, motioning him toward a chair behind one of the two walnut reading tables. When Slocum sat down, McKnight took the chair facing him.

"You're right, of course," he said. "Peggy and I met at Fort Dix in 1943 while Peggy was making *Stuff 'n' Duffl*. I'd been married to Grace for seven years, and I loved her dearly. It was the seven-year itch, I suppose. No, it was more than that. I fell head over heels in love with Peggy. We spent as many hours together as we could. There were some secluded tourist cabins in Browns Mills in those days. In 1944 we had a child, a little boy. Grace never learned of it. Never. We named him—"

"Harold."

McKnight stared at Slocum from beneath tangled white eye-

brows. "You're one step ahead of me, Fred. How in the world did we keep it a secret from *you* all these years? Yes, we named him Harold. He was as cute a baby as you've ever seen. But we knew we couldn't keep him. Our careers were too important to us. In those days the scandal would have been monumental. Peggy would have been ostracized, even blacklisted. My political career, which was just getting under way, would have been finished. We agonized over our decision, but we gave Harold up for adoption, with strict safeguards against anyone's ever finding out who his parents were. Including Harold."

"And the Star of Rangoon?"

"I bought it from a New York gem dealer the month Harold was born. I gave it to Peggy as a symbol of our love. An orange star seemed the perfect gift. Peggy *was* an Orange star, you see—a movie princess and an Irish Protestant. I'm an Irish Catholic myself, County Limerick, and that would have landed us in trouble all by itself."

Slocum had started to take notes. McKnight made no objection.

He went on. "Peggy agreed that when she died the gem would go to our son. We assumed that by then Harold would be grown up. Which he is. Fifty-three in February. He was

adopted when he was less than six months old by Wayne and Iris Halloran. They lived in Freeport, Long Island, at the time. Wayne was an architect. Iris was a graphic artist. They're both dead now."

"And Harold Halloran lives in Lucent Springs, Florida."

McKnight stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Thirteen Dunedin Drive, Lucent Springs. I got that out of a guide for autograph collectors. But how in the world did you get it? You didn't start on Peggy's biography until yesterday, did you?"

"Sources," Slocum said with a smile. "You have sources, I have sources."

"But I'm surprised you called him Harold. I doubt that anyone has called him Harold since he started pitching for the St. Louis Cardinals. He's always been Hal in the sports pages. *The Baseball Encyclopedia* lists him as Hal Halloran."

It was Fred Slocum's turn to be surprised. Hal Halloran, the one-time left-handed ace of the Cardinals, was probably better known today than either Peggy Thayer or Gaylord S. McKnight. The Freeport Flame they called him in his pitching days, and most sportswriters agreed he had more talent, and far more intelligence, than most of the jocks of his era, though he never made the Hall of Fame. When

the *Baseball Register* listed his hobbies, they weren't the usual "hunting and fishing" but rather "aviation and movie history."

"This is going to be big news," Slocum murmured. "Does Halloran have any idea who his real parents are?"

McKnight shook his head. "No. Our secret was well kept. The confidentiality has been absolute."

"He'll know soon, though. Once he learns he's inherited the Star of Rangoon, he'll guess right away it wasn't because he shut out the Red Sox twice in the '67 World Series."

Glancing at his wristwatch, the ex-governor said, "I'm going to have to visit Grace in the infirmary in a few minutes. If you'd like to talk more about Peggy, we'll have to make it another time."

"Soon, if we can."

"Oh, one other thing. You might be interested in this. Come with me."

McKnight got up, grimacing a bit as he straightened his back. He took Slocum's arm once again, the politician's flesh on flesh, and led him to what in a hotel would have been the front desk. A young man wearing a tan jacket and a brown tie stood behind the counter.

"Box number 354," McKnight said.

"Yes, sir, Mr. McKnight. Your card?"

Taking the plastic proffered him, the young man went into a room behind him and came back carrying a small steel drawer with a combination lock on the front. McKnight and Slocum retired again to the library, where McKnight, sitting down, deftly twirled the dial left, right, left, and click. He opened the drawer and pointed to its contents.

A large green gem sparkled under the overhead lamp. It was unmounted, solitary.

"The Lovejoy Emerald," McKnight explained. "From Colombia. I told Peggy not to be foolish. I was in my late thirties and well-to-do. She was just a kid, still struggling. But she wouldn't hear of it. She bought the emerald for me about a week after I gave her the sapphire. It took all her *Stuff 'n' Duff'l* money, I think. She said, 'Money is to spend, Gay. This is what I want to do with it. Whenever you look at the emerald, think of me. And think of Harold.' We agreed that upon my death the emerald would go to our son. And it will."

With that, McKnight arose, shook Slocum's hand, and said, "Now, if you'll excuse me, Fred."

Fred would and did, finding his way out the front door, between the towering white columns, and back along the

winding floral trail to catch the bus for Manhattan. Not until he reached the bus stop did it occur to him that neither he nor McKnight had said a word about the murder of the ex-governor's lost love.

That night Fred Slocum worked out a careful plan for researching the life of Peggy Thayer. Her sudden death was beyond the scope of his assignment. He would trust the New York City police to find her killer. His first task, pleasant in prospect, was to watch all of Thayer's eleven films, from her triumphant debut in *Folderol* to her sad finale in *The Dead Walk at Midnight*.

The next morning his plan exploded into a thousand shards. For when his radio alarm clock sprang to life at seven o'clock, the first words he heard rattled his composure and spurred him to action:

"New Jersey State Police have several clues but no suspects in last night's slaying of former New Jersey Governor Gaylord S. McKnight. The eighty-eight-year-old politician who served in President Eisenhower's cabinet was brutally stabbed to death on the grounds of the exclusive retirement community where he resided in Preston Hills, New Jersey. Police are unsure of the exact time of the murder but believe it occurred between ten

P.M. and midnight. More details as they become available."

Slocum leaned over in bed, punched the announcer to silence, grabbed the phone, and dialed his travel agent. "Get me on a flight to Lucent Springs, Florida," he snapped. "Anytime after eight thirty this morning. The earlier the better."

Five hours later Fred Slocum aimed his rental Corsica into the narrow driveway at 13 Dunedin Drive, Lucent Springs. The modest, one story house, pastel green with windows that needed washing, seemed deserted. Three newspapers lay yellowing on the sidewalk. Fred stood at the front doorway, ringing the bell, until he was quite certain no one would answer. Then he tried the door. It opened.

Cautiously he poked his way into a tiny foyer. The house smelled of liquor and stale cigarettes.

He saw the note at once. It lay on a narrow table with chrome legs and a green marble top. It was handwritten in a neat, unhurried script. Fred read the note without touching it or anything else in the foyer. It said:

To whom it may concern—

Three people are dead—Peggy Thayer, Gaylord S. McKnight, and me. Mother, father, and son. I spent more than thirty years

trying to locate my parents. What I thought would be my love for them turned in time to resentment, then to hate. When I was a baby, they abandoned me, covering their tracks like the cowards they were. I learned their identities last week through an ex-nun who renounced her vows after spending most of her life in the church. She despised them for what they did. I always wondered why my parents deserted me. Was it because they were poor and couldn't support me? No. It was because they were rich and successful and wouldn't acknowledge me. My search for them ruined my life. It cost me my selfhood, my marriages, and most of my money. They have reaped what they sowed. Their avoidance of me, their casual cruelty, has now cost them their lives. Payback at last. My plane, if anyone cares, will be somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean off Cape Hatteras. So will I. Best wishes.

Hal Halloran

Fred Slocum decided to touch something after all. The telephone. He found it in Halloran's cluttered living room beside a well-worn leather sofa. He dialed Jasper Cass's number at Bosley-Munn, reached Ella, Cass's secretary, and told her to put her boss on the line even if

she had to interrupt a meeting with Ross Perot.

"Freddie boy. Why the hysteria? I've got a meeting here."

"Take five. It'll be worth it. I'm in Lucent Springs, Florida, at Hal Halloran's house. Let me read you something."

Slocum slowly read him the note. Cass whistled. After a moment's pause he said, "Snatch that note, Freddie. Bring it back to New York with you. You've got more than a routine bio going, wouldn't you say? We'll renegotiate your contract. You've got a goddamn coup."

"Is it legal? Taking the note?"

"Legal, schmegal. Bring it back. Who's to know? We're talking bestseller here. Now it can be told' stuff. You've got an exclusive, Freddie boy. Don't blow it."

On the flight to LaGuardia, it occurred to Fred that Hal Halloran might not have crashed his Cessna at all. He might be covering up his escape. But as soon as Fred landed, his doubts evaporated. There at the arrival gate, mingling uneasily with the sign-carrying chauffeurs, stood Jasper Cass. The editor-in-chief was running a manicured hand through his blow-dried coif.

"It's true, Freddie boy," Cass said in a low voice, his eyes darting left and right as if spies lurked everywhere. "The Coast Guard picked up Halloran's

body a couple of hours ago off Nags Head. His Cessna was all smashed to hell. Some guy in a fishing boat said the plane went into a vertical dive from about a thousand feet up and hit the water like a kamikaze."

Slocum said, "Hadn't I better turn in the suicide note?"

"Freddie, it's a wonder you ever got beyond shining shoes for a living. You've got no chutzpah. Hang onto that note. Put it in a safe place. Use it when you get to chapter whatever. Don't show it to anybody. This case is a closed circle. It won't be solved. Not officially, anyway. Why should the police waste their time trying to convict a dead man?"

Cass was right. The circle was closed. The murders of Peggy Thayer and Gaylord S. McKnight disappeared from the media within a couple of weeks. Unofficially, most people understood at least some of what had taken place. But complete understanding awaited the hardcover revelations of Fred Slocum.

The terms of Peggy Thayer's and Gaylord S. McKnight's wills held. The Star of Rangoon went to Hal Halloran's estate. So did the Lovejoy Emerald, just as McKnight said it would. Except for those two prizes, the ex-ballplayer's estate would have attracted little attention. With

them, it wrote the Halloran epitaph.

For Hal Halloran left a will, too. Drawn up long before he learned the identity of his parents; it stated that all his assets, which Hal must have figured at about forty thousand dollars, would go to the new Marilyn Monroe Museum, Library, and Film Arts Center then being built in Bel Air, California. The suddenly pumped-up Halloran estate, which topped twenty million dollars, lent giddy wings to the planners of the Monroe memorial.

The Triple-M, as the museum complex came to be called, added a Hal Halloran wing. Its facade displayed a bronze plaque of the one-time Cardinal pitching star that looked remarkably like those found in the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown. The wing itself featured continuous showings of Marilyn Monroe films.

Jasper Cass regarded this turn of events as grandly amusing. "Hal's mom would have torched the damn place, plaque and all," he chortled. "Peggy liked Marilyn Monroe about as much as she liked coral snakes."

When Fred Slocum turned in his manuscript for *The Orange*

Star, Cass insisted on celebratory drinks at the Raven Bar on upper Broadway. "Your place, not mine," the hard-driving editor told his newly bankable author. "Who needs the Café des Artistes?"

On the third round Fred was moved to say, "Poor Hal. The Freeport Flame. He could have been a multimillionaire."

"Like you will be, Freddie boy," Cass intoned. "Like you will be."

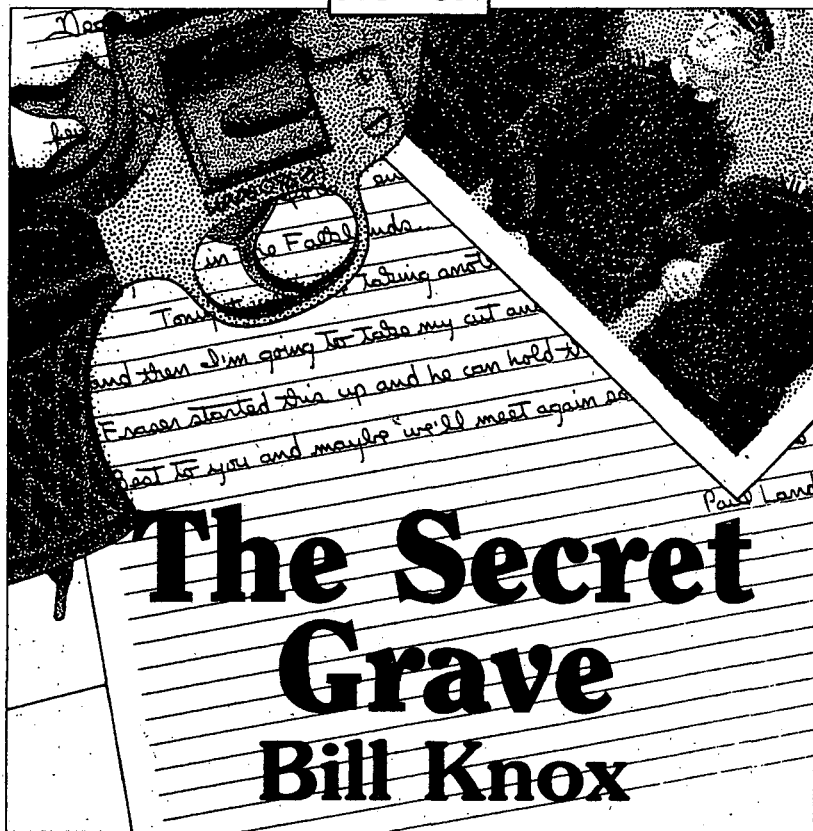
"It's sad, isn't it? Halloran never knew those two gems were sitting there all those years, just waiting for Peggy and Gaylord to die."

"Maybe he had a premonition," Cass suggested. "Hal and his ghostwriter knocked out an autobiography twenty-five years ago. Called *Diamond Destiny*, I think."

Slocum thought for a moment. "Oh yeah, I remember. Six or seven fans in St. Louis bought it, didn't they? It bombed worse than Peggy Thayer."

"A Bosley-Munn book, too," Cass admitted.

Pensively they sipped their third Bushmills, observing a moment of silence for the Orange star, the Emerald Isle dad, and the diamond-dust kid.



"As an officer of the court, I would never actually advocate breaking the law," said Harry Bruce solemnly. Then the thin, horsefaced Scottish lawyer allowed himself the luxury of a grin. "But if it's in a good cause, what's wrong with stretching things a little? How do you two fancy a little spot of breaking and entering?"

"As in burglary?" David Bannerman exchanged a slightly startled glance with his dark-haired sister Helen. "You're serious?"

"I'm always serious," said Bruce indignantly.

"No comment," said Helen Bannerman dryly. She wondered if she would ever forget a wild, on-the-tiles night when, just once, she'd gone out with

Harry Bruce on a date. Neither before nor since, never in her life, had she been left with such a hangover. "But tell us anyway."

The lawyer nodded. With only a last-minute advance telephone warning, he had appeared that afternoon at the offices of Banner Agencies, the modest little Edinburgh private inquiry firm that the two Bannermans ran in partnership. In the moments before he was shown through to where both Bannermans were waiting, he had tried to invite Jo-Ann, their receptionist, out for a meal. That was Harry Bruce's style—but he was also one of the best legal brains in the Scottish capital. Now, opening his briefcase, he brought out a thin folder and tapped it with a fingertip.

"This one matters. That's why I've come to you. I want you to break into a particular house."

"Does the owner know?" asked David Bannerman stonily.

"Naturally." The lawyer looked almost shocked. "Or at least his wife does. It's her idea."

"Go on, Harry," said Helen Bannerman. "We'll listen. What's it all about?"

"It's about discovering the reason for a man's fear and whether he is being blackmailed," said Bruce. He looked at brother and sister for a moment—David Bannerman, tall

and fairhaired, Helen darkhaired and vivaciously plump. A total contrast in every possible way, they took an equal say in any decision. "We're talking about the father of one of our most promising members of Parliament, maybe a future cabinet minister. That's why it matters."

Pausing, he glanced down at the file again; then told the rest of it.

Bernice Fisher, a still-attractive blonde in her early sixties, had appeared in his office that morning. Her husband Kennedy Fisher was well known in the road haulage world and had been Bruce's client for many years. Fraser, their only son, had won a medal for bravery as a "boy hero" during the Falklands War in the early eighties. Now his future political prospects seemed guaranteed.

In short, Bernice Fisher had a loving husband, a successful son, and every reason to be happy. But, she told Harry Bruce, "I just know that something has gone very wrong."

It had begun two months earlier. Overnight, her husband had become worried and short-tempered at the same time that an unknown man began telephoning their house. After each call Kennedy Fisher had almost immediately announced that a

problem had turned up at work and had gone out on his own.

After about the fifth call Bernice Fisher had waited and then telephoned the Fisher Transport Company's office. Her husband wasn't there. Then she discovered that the old service revolver that Kennedy Fisher normally kept in his bedside drawer was gone.

Next morning it was back in place as before. It hadn't been used.

"Bernice Fisher is a resourceful woman," said Bruce soberly. "She went to their bank; she discovered that her husband had recently drawn out a total of fifty thousand pounds from his personal account, leaving it almost empty."

"Has to be blackmail," mused David Bannerman. "Any thoughts on why?"

"I said Bernice Fisher was resourceful." The horsefaced lawyer shrugged. "Kennedy Fisher has suddenly begun locking the bottom drawer of his desk at home. He has the only key. She can't open it—she's tried."

"Now it's your turn."

The Bannermans exchanged a resigned glance.

"When?" asked David Bannerman.

"Tonight," said Harry Bruce. "She says she'll leave a window open."

Helen crossed to her own window and looked down at the sunlit view. The Banner Agencies' office was just off Princes Street; the window gave a glimpse of Edinburgh Castle high above on its rise of rock.

She frowned for a moment. The unusual was a specialty at the Banner Agencies. Founded by their father, a retired police inspector, it kept scrupulously clear of the grubby end of the private inquiry world. More than a year before, when their parents had signed over the business to them and retired to a villa in Spain, brother and sister had promised it would stay that way.

"David?" she asked, looking round.

"I've nothing else planned," said David Bannerman. "Why not?"

It was two A.M. when they silently made their way across the side garden of a large two story house in the upmarket suburb of Cramond on the outskirts of Edinburgh. So far they had been lucky—it was a night made for breaking and entering, with dark clouds, hardly any moonlight, and only an occasional light gust of wind.

"This one," hissed David, beckoning Helen toward a window. They were both wearing dark overalls that blended into

the night. He pointed. "Left open, just as she promised."

She nodded, seeing the narrow gap. "Let's do it."

They opened the window and climbed through, Helen's lack of height meaning she needed an unceremonious boost on her rear. Inside, David Bannerman shone a shaded torch around the study and located the large oak desk in one corner. They started towards it.

Something toppled noisily. He cursed under his breath, lowered the torch, and saw he'd knocked over a small wooden drinks table. Helen glared, they froze for a moment, but they heard no reaction from elsewhere. When they reached the desk, it was as they'd been told—only the one bottom drawer was locked.

"Can do?" murmured Bannerman, shining the torch's beam close to the lock.

"No problem," said his sister.

This was her department. Reaching inside her overalls, she drew out the slim, canvas-wrapped roll of locksmith's tools that their father had acquired along the way during his police career. One was a little device that had started life as an optician's ophthalmoscope but had been drastically altered.

"Hold on." Working in the light from the torch, she inserted an almost needle-thin tube at

the head of the ophthalmoscope into the keyhole. When she pressed a button, a tiny mirror at the end of the tube was lit by a glowing miniature bulb.

"What do you reckon?" hissed her brother impatiently.

"Nice and simple, just like you." Helen grinned at him in the darkness, inspected the inside of the lock mechanism again, then sat back.

She took a piece of thick wire from the tool roll and used a pair of jeweler's pliers to bend one end of it into a very precise miniature double V. Trying the wire in the lock, she made a slight adjustment with the pliers, inserted it again, and turned it.

The lock gave a gentle click. David Bannerman pulled the drawer open and peered in at some newspaper cuttings, a single brown envelope—and nothing more. Puzzled, he lifted the cuttings, glanced through them, then gave a soft whistle of surprise.

Each fragment of newsprint was devoted to the same story. But why should Kennedy Fisher be so interested in a murder mystery from the 1980's?

He picked up the envelope, found the flap unsealed, and drew out the single sheet of photocopy paper that was inside.

And the room light clicked on.

"Stay exactly as you are—both of you!" A blue dressing gown draped over his pajamas, wisping grey hair tousled, the little man standing in the study doorway was scowling at them. His determination was backed by the blued metal of a revolver clenched tightly in one fist. "Damned sneaking burglars—well, you're caught. And you—the revolver pointed directly at David Bannerman—"put that letter down!"

"Easy," Bannerman said. The revolver was a .38. The muzzle was trained exactly on his middle. "You're Kennedy Fisher, right?"

"I am," Fisher stopped, staring at Helen. "Dear God, you're a woman!"

"True," said Helen mildly.

"Makes no odds. Didn't find anything worth stealing, did you?" He raised his voice. "Bernice, I've got them. Call the police!"

"That might be pretty stupid, Mr. Fisher," said David. He held up the letter and the cuttings. "Do you want them to know about these?"

Fisher's face tightened, and at the same time there was a rustle of silk. Petite, neat in a flame-red housecoat, her blonde hair covered in a scarf turban-style, his wife entered the room.

"Why are you two here?" demanded Fisher hoarsely.

"Because I invited them, Kennedy," said Bernice Fisher gently. "I had to do something. And put down that stupid gun in case there's some kind of an accident—please!" She smiled apologetically at the Bannermans. "You're David and Helen, aren't you? Harry Bruce told me all about you."

"Like how I trip over tables?" grimaced Bannerman. "Sorry."

"You asked them—" Shaken, bewildered, Kennedy Fisher reluctantly lowered his revolver. "Bernice, are you serious?"

"This is Helen and David Bannerman, from the Banner Agencies—private detectives, dear." She took her husband by the arm. "I asked them to break into your desk. For your sake and for mine."

"Your wife cares enough to want to help you, Mr. Fisher," said Helen. "Men don't draw a small fortune from the bank and go out to strange appointments carrying a gun unless there's real trouble. That's why we're here."

Kennedy Fisher's face had gone white. He looked at the gun in his hand, then, trembling slightly, put the weapon into the pocket of his dressing gown. Crossing to a corner cupboard, he took out a whisky bottle and a glass and poured himself a drink. He swallowed the neat

liquor in a single gulp, then faced them again.

"I don't think it can help, Bernice," he said slowly, looking at her for a long moment. "Except maybe it is time I told you." He indicated the Bannermans. "You feel we can trust them?"

"The way you trust Harry Bruce as your lawyer." She gave her visitors a wry smile. "My husband wakened when you knocked over the table. I tried to tell him it was nothing, but he *would* come down."

"So now that you know about us, do we get to hear about these?" David Bannerman indicated the cuttings.

Fisher shrugged. "Read the letter."

"And I think we *all* deserve a drink." Briskly, Bernice Fisher found more glasses, poured another three whiskies, passed two to the Bannermans, and sipped the third herself. "That's better."

Silently David Bannerman read the letter, looked at the cuttings again, then passed them over to Helen. Her eyes widened as she read.

"Bernice, I'm sorry." Fisher went over to his wife. "Try to understand. Please."

He sighed. "Three months ago an old cottage was being demolished not far from Ardrossan, over on the west coast. It was close to the shore. The workmen found a body buried under the

stone floor in the kitchen. It wasn't so much a body as a skeleton dressed in what had been a naval officer's uniform. He'd been shot through the head. It happened years ago."

"I read about it." She nodded, bewildered.

"The police managed to identify him as a Lieutenant Paul Landert. He disappeared in 1982, and the Royal Navy wrote it off at the time as desertion."

"So?" She still looked bewildered, but something like forboding was stirring.

A month after the skeleton was found, Kennedy Fisher told them, he had received the first telephone call. The stranger at the other end hadn't wasted words. Fisher's son was an up-and-coming member of Parliament. It would be unfortunate if something damaging about his past came to light.

"A nice opening gambit in blackmail," David said.

Fisher ignored the interruption. He had met the man, he said, prepared to squash any threat put forward. Instead he left the meeting feeling shocked and beaten. The stranger's name was Vincent Morton. He had produced an old snapshot of three men in naval uniform—himself with, on one side, the youngster who was now Fraser Fisher, Member of Parliament,

and on the other a grinning Lieutenant Paul Landert.

"In 1982 we were serving aboard the same troop landing ship based at Ardrossan in the Firth of Clyde," Morton told Kennedy Fisher. "We'd been there for months. Suddenly we found ourselves in beach landing exercises up and down the Firth, earmarked for the Falklands War—which is where your son and I went. But not friend Landert."

He then showed Kennedy Fisher a photostat of a handwritten letter he claimed Landert had posted to him on the night he disappeared.

It was damning enough evidence. An apparent farewell note from Landert to Morton, it said that Landert had been in partnership with Fraser Fisher in a lucrative money-making scam, selling naval stores on the black market. But now Landert had had enough. That night he and Fisher were stealing another truckload from one of the Ardrossan depots, and it would be Landert's last. He'd take his share of the cash and get out, heading for London. He had been tipped that some shortages were suspected, and that apart, he wanted to stay well clear of the Falklands War.

The letter claimed that Fraser Fisher had begun the stores theft racket. Now Fisher could

"hold the baby," whatever trouble broke. Maybe Landert would see Morton again somewhere, sometime.

"Let me guess," said David Bannerman sardonically. "Now Morton says that if the police saw the original of that letter—"

"They'd have good reason to arrest my son for murder," said Fisher bitterly.

"Could they?" His wife fought to remain calm. "Would they?"

"At very least he'd have a lot of questions to answer," said Helen bluntly. "That's if the letter is genuine. Does your son know about it, Mr. Fisher?"

Kennedy Fisher shook his head. "He's in London, hasn't been home in weeks. I've said nothing."

"Meantime, Morton has taken your money and wants more?" David Bannerman asked.

"No. I offered it, but he only took about half for what he called expenses, then laughed at me," Kennedy Fisher said to their surprise. "He said a time was coming when he'd want me to do certain things for him." He chewed his lip. "When that happened, I was to remember that he had the letter, and do what he told me. Now all I can do is wait."

"It's late." David Bannerman glanced at his watch. "Time we let you and your wife get back to sleep, Mr. Fisher." He gave the

greyhaired little man an encouraging smile. "There are a couple of possibilities Helen and I could try, like having our own meeting with this ex-Lieutenant Morton."

"He might not like it," warned Fisher.

"I'll guarantee it," Bannerman said. "But right now you can tell me where we can find him, and maybe help us with one or two other things. Then we'll go."

"But we'll use the door this time," murmured Helen.

Brother and sister lived in separate apartment blocs located fairly close to the Banner Agencies' office off Princes Street. They arrived almost together around ten o'clock every morning, which gave Jo-Ann, their receptionist, time to open the mail and have coffee bubbling.

It didn't take long to sort out the first things that needed to be done and who would do what; then David Bannerman set off to visit Vincent Morton. The onetime naval officer had a shabby office in a low-rent block in the east end of the city, located behind a glass door with black lettering that said MORTON ASSOCIATES. His secretary was a long-legged brunette who ushered Bannerman through to the small private office at the

back where Morton awaited him.

"Get lost for half an hour, Anna," said Morton curtly. Lean, sleek-haired, sharp-featured, and well dressed, he considered Bannerman for a moment while the girl left, sulkily, and they heard the outer door close. Then he allowed what might have been a smile to twitch across his face. "Kennedy Fisher telephoned. You want to talk about the letter, right?"

Bannerman nodded.

"No problem." Morton made it a sneer. "It's in a banker's safe. Send any expert you choose to examine it, try any test you want—handwriting comparison, age of paper, ink. You'll find it genuine, and enough to send my old shipmate Fraser Fisher to a life sentence for murder. So—" Morton opened a wooden box on the desk beside him, took out a cigarette, and lit it "—I would advise against anything to do with police."

"We'll check it out," said Bannerman stonily. "But Kennedy Fisher demands to know exactly what you want from him for keeping quiet. What's your price?"

"Price?" Morton gave a mock frown. "Money? Not from the father of an old friend. I may need a favor soon, that's all."

"Tell me more about the letter."

"That's simple enough." Morton drew on his cigarette for a moment, confident. "All three of us were serving on the same naval landing ship, based on Ardrossan. We weren't living aboard at the time—the navy had found us billets at a local hotel. We spent a lot of off-duty time together ashore. Then Fisher and Landert began to go off on their own every now and again." He shrugged. "I didn't ask questions, but I gradually saw Landert become more and more worried about something that seemed to be going on between them."

"You were too polite to ask?" suggested Bannerman caustically.

"The old golden rule. Mind your own damned business." Morton took a last draw on his cigarette and stubbed it out in an ashtray. "Then—well, one night they both went out, but Landert didn't come back. Two days later this letter arrived by post."

"You didn't tell anyone about it?"

"No one—not even Fisher. If Landert had been stealing navy stores, that was his worry. He'd done a bunk, Fisher was acting the innocent, and I kept my mouth shut. Then, as Landert had predicted, a row began brewing over missing stores. The navy obviously put two and

two together, decided Landert was responsible, and that was that."

"Except you kept the letter."

"Insurance," shrugged Morton. "Then, of course, after all these years Fraser Fisher has a spot of bad luck. They find Landert's body, and my letter becomes very important."

"Valuable, too." Bannerman rose from his chair. "We'll run those tests. One other thing. About this old cottage. Ever been there?"

"Never." Morton scribbled briefly on a sheet of paper, handed it over, then added a folded sheet from his desk. "That's my bank address. They'll expect you. And that's another sample of Landert's handwriting, for comparison. If you need more, try Admiralty records."

Vincent Morton was very confident.

It was late afternoon when David Bannerman went back to Kennedy Fisher's home. Fisher and his wife were waiting, equally tense, equally anxious, even if Bernice Fisher made the better job of controlling her feelings.

"Things aren't shaping the way I hoped," admitted Bannerman. "I've had an expert examine that letter, someone who knows his job. He says it is an

untampered-with original, the right age in every way. It is Lander's handwriting—no chance of it being a forgery."

"I don't care," exploded Kennedy Fisher. "I don't believe it—I can't!"

"We know our son," said Bernice Fisher. She shook her head. "This is just a nightmare. He couldn't be involved."

"Isn't it time he had a chance to say that for himself?" asked Bannerman.

Husband and wife exchanged an agonized glance.

"We've already spoken to him," said Bannerman gently. "My sister is flying down to London to meet him this evening. But if Morton contacts you, don't let him know." He eyed the grey-haired contractor grimly. "And if Morton comes up with any kind of proposition, don't argue. Just agree. We need to make him feel he's winning."

The British Airways shuttle flight from Edinburgh landed at Heathrow about an hour after takeoff, thanks to a tailwind, and Helen Bannerman was one of the first passengers through the domestic arrivals gate. Fraser Fisher was waiting there—she had seen his face on TV and in newspapers too often for there to be any difficulty about recognizing him. She went straight towards him.

"Helen Bannerman?" he asked.

She nodded, and they sized each other up for a moment. The member of Parliament had put on some weight since his naval days and his uniform now was the dark-suited, white-collared Westminster political style, but he preserved more than a hint of the air and dash of the goodlooking Falklands hero of earlier years.

"I won't pretend to know what this is all about," said the M.P. grimly. "But you hinted enough on the phone to get me here. Now I want to hear more."

"You will," promised Helen. "Where can we talk?"

"Not here." Fraser Fisher's answer was a cab ride to a small, surprisingly quiet bar within sight of Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. He waited until they were seated, drinks in front of them, then explained, "I have to be somewhere near the House. There's a vote coming up later I can't miss. So—?"

"All right." Helen Bannerman sipped her drink and then started the story.

For the next few minutes she paraded the cold, hard facts of the situation before the man opposite, keeping her voice to a murmur, watching his mood change from outright disbelief to open concern.

"But it's all crazy, fantastic," he said at last.

"That's what your mother said. But where were you the night Landert disappeared?"

"I was supposed to meet him along the shore," said Fisher bitterly. "He didn't turn up."

"Have you told anyone?"

"The police came to see me soon after the body was found. A routine visit—they weren't too interested. I'd been asked the same questions back then when he vanished."

Helen Bannerman caught the barman's eye and signaled for another round for them both.

"My turn," she said. "Now try telling it from the beginning."

Fraser Fisher did. He'd been reasonably friendly with both Landert and Morton when they were just three junior lieutenants serving aboard the same naval landing ship based at Ardrossan. That was more or less inevitable when three young men were thrown together that way. But as far as he was concerned, it had been Landert and Morton who had been close—and it was not until after Landert disappeared that he'd learned anything about admiralty stores being stolen.

"How much went?" asked Helen.

"From what I heard, a lot." The fairhaired politician grimaced. "And when I look back,

neither Morton nor Landert ever seemed short of cash." He swirled the liquor in his glass. "The night Landert vanished, I simply got this message saying he wanted to meet me on the beach at ten P.M."

"So he didn't ask you directly?"

Fisher shook his head. "We were billeted ashore. I found a note in my room, typed on a message form. All Landert said was that he was in a spot of bother and needed to talk about it but didn't want anyone else to know. Except, as I said, he didn't turn up—and the next morning we discovered he'd disappeared."

"Did you keep the note?"

"No, I threw it away."

"What about afterwards?"

"We were heading for the Falklands. We sailed for the South Atlantic less than a week later, and the defalcations of one junior lieutenant became pretty small beer. When we reached the Falklands, we went straight into action, and our part of the task force was pretty badly knocked around."

"Go back to the note," Helen said. "Who knew about it at the time?"

"I think I told Morton. Nobody else. Not too good, is it?"

"Paul Landert was shot through the head," said Helen, watching him. "I checked with a

police contact this afternoon, and found out that the bullet was from a .38 handgun. When you were in the navy, did you have a revolver?"

"A Webley .38 service issue," agreed Fisher sadly. "'Officers, landing craft, to be used by.' Never fired a shot in anger—a spare pair of socks would have been more useful."

"If we could trace that revolver—" Helen dismissed the thought.

"And check it against the bullet that killed Landert?" The M.P. brightened. "Why not?"

Helen stared. "You mean you know where it is?"

Fisher grinned his relief. "My father has it."

"He had a gun the first time we met," said Helen dryly. "You're sure it is the same one?"

"Positive. Remember, I told you our task force had a rough time at the Falklands—"

"When you got a medal," Helen nodded.

"A few were handed out," shrugged Fisher. "In fact, our landing ship was badly damaged, and most of us had to be completely rekkitted. It was a regular ploy to say that a lot of your gear had been 'lost in action.' I got a new revolver among other things and took the old one home as a souvenir. Dad has had it ever since."

"Good!" Helen was ready to

bet serious money that somewhere there was a dusty Admiralty file that listed the first Webley's serial number against Fisher's name—and somewhere else a note of the second weapon issued, the revolver he would have handed in when he left the navy. "Would Morton know about it?"

"No." Fisher was emphatic. "I told everyone I'd lost the weapon—and the rest. I've still got a damned good service watch—"

"That I don't want to know about," she stopped him. "How would you feel if we quietly had that revolver tested by the police?"

"Go ahead." A pager in his pocket began beeping. "I'm needed back at the House. That vote will be coming up soon. You'll—well, keep my parents clear of any more hassle?"

"We'll do our best."

"Thanks." Reaching across the table, Fisher touched her hand and gave her an almost boyish smile. Then he rose and left.

Helen Bannerman sighed and shook her head. She didn't usually like politicians of any age or persuasion, but this one was different. He was also on file as still a bachelor despite having been linked to a long list of goodlooking women.

She had missed the late shut-

the flight back to Edinburgh. Resigned to the fact, she took a taxi back to Heathrow and booked in at one of the airport hotels for the night. She telephoned her brother in Edinburgh; then booked an early-morning call. That way she was on the first shuttle flight out the next morning. David met her at Edinburgh Airport, and they ate breakfast in the airport restaurant before they drove to the Fishers' house.

Fisher and his wife were both there, both eager for news.

"It looks good," said David Bannerman. "But I need to borrow that revolver your son brought back from the navy."

"I'll get it," said Fisher. "And we've had something happen here, just as you forecast. Morton telephoned me late last night, demanding another meeting. I went—and he said that now that I knew the letter he had was genuine he was calling for the first of the favors he wanted."

"He doesn't waste time," said Bernice Fisher angrily. "But at least we now know what he really wants."

"What's the favor?" asked Helen.

"I run a haulage firm—he wants trucks." Kennedy Fisher's voice was bleak. "Four large trucks to move a stolen export consignment of whisky. He'll

supply the drivers, they'll take the whisky to one of my depots, and I've to store it until he's ready to move it on."

"Four trucks—" David Bannerman sucked his teeth.

"One truck could carry several hundred cases of whisky. He's setting up a major robbery," said Fisher. "You don't have to tell me that if I do it he'll own me from then on. I'll get the revolver, Bannerman—and I'll pray that finishes the business."

The Banner Agencies were owed a few favors by the city's police. The fact that their father had been in the force also helped, and David Bannerman often played poker with the detective chief inspector who ran the ballistics laboratory. By midday, when they took the borrowed Webley to the laboratory building at headquarters, the bullet recovered from the skeleton's shattered skull had been brought through by road from the rival laboratory in Glasgow where it had been held.

The test went ahead. One shot from the naval .38 Webley was fired into the laboratory test box, the bullet recovered, and the two slugs of metal placed together under the comparison microscope. The whitecoated bureau officer took a very long time over his examination. At last he gave a long sigh and looked up.

"All right, you two," he told the Bannermans. "Be very glad you brought this gun here. The barrel markings match beyond any dispute." He saw their expressions. "Whatever you expected, this is the murder gun."

"You're sure?" David Bannerman stared at him.

"Very sure. If this were a poker hand, I'd put everything I've got on it. Which means all favors are ended."

"So where did this gun come from?" asked another officer who had been observing in the background. He was a detective superintendent named Wallace. "Don't mess about—this matters. Who had it?"

"Originally it was issued to Fraser Fisher."

"The M.P.?" Detective Superintendent Wallace raised an expressive eyebrow. "I read the reports. Didn't he serve on the same boat—"

"Ship," corrected Helen and ignored the glare that brought.

"The same boat, ship, whatever, beside Landert when Landert disappeared—"

"It gets worse," admitted David Bannerman.

"But he could be totally innocent," said his sister determinedly.

They told their story. Wallace listened, grunted a few times, then scratched one ear.

"We can get Morton for at-

tempted blackmail and withholding evidence, and add the whisky raid," he declared. "But that doesn't affect Fraser Fisher's position, and you know it. All Fisher can offer is a hazy story he can't back up—and his gun was the murder weapon." He gave a cynical grin. "He wouldn't be the first politician who tried to get away with murder, right?"

"Very funny," said Helen Bannerman frostily. "Except it was Fisher who told me he still had the revolver, it was Fisher who agreed we could bring it to you. Why?"

Detective Superintendent Wallace shrugged. "Why ask me?"

Trying to think, getting nowhere with it, David Bannerman picked up the .38 lying on the laboratory bench and flipped open the chamber. It held six cartridge cases, only one of them fired.

"Didn't Fisher say this gun had never been fired in anger?" he asked his sister.

She nodded.

"How about other times?" Bannerman didn't wait for an answer. "Look at these cartridge cases. All have the same code stamping on the base—GB-380-MK1. Then the year of manufacture, right? But—"

Helen saw it first. "But five are dated 1979, and only num-

ber six is dated 1981. So one cartridge came from a totally different stock—which has to mean at a totally different time.”

“Which proves what?” Wallace wasn’t impressed. “Maybe the ’81 cartridge replaced the cartridge that killed Landert.”

“Hold on.” Suddenly the whitecoated ballistics expert came to life. “We might just be onto something. This may take a little time.” He picked up the revolver and went out of the room. Several minutes passed before he returned, and when he did, there was a considerable difference in his manner.

“Got something?” asked Bannerman.

“Yes.” The man beamed. “This 1981 cartridge makes a very nice little piece of evidence. There’s a fingerprint on it, one that could have been there for a long time and one that is totally different from any fingerprints on the other five.” He turned to Helen. “Will your tame politician cooperate with the police in London?”

“Like a shot,” said Helen.

“There could be a better way to put it,” twinkled the ballistics expert. “Use my telephone, call him. Then I’ll organize some coffee—this next part we can’t rush.”

Time dragged on—and on. They had sandwiches brought through. At last one part of the

information they needed was assembled. A fax from London advised that Fraser Fisher, interviewed, confirmed that he had fired a few test rounds with his revolver soon after it was issued in 1980. It had not been fired since, nor had the ammunition been changed. A full set of his fingerprints, also faxed from London, matched the prints on five of the cartridges. A car sent out had returned with a sample of his father’s prints and they matched prints on the outer parts of the .38. But the prints on that solitary 1981 cartridge remained unidentified.

“My money stays on Morton,” said David Bannerman.

Detective Superintendent Wallace shrugged. Vince Morton’s prints weren’t in any police file. His name didn’t appear on any of the computerized Criminal Records files. But one place where his name had turned up several times was when another computerized file had been tried—the one that stored all the loose, often unrelated wisps of gossip put together from informants’ whispers and back-page scribbles in police notebooks.

For some time there had been at least a suspicion that Morton’s alleged legitimate business was nothing more than a front behind which he regularly handled stolen property.

"We could pull him in," scowled Wallace. "But he could probably fast-talk his way back out into the street." He sighed. "Justice took a hard knock the day we had to stop bouncing people like Morton off walls."

"There's another way," said Helen, considering him carefully. "You hold off; we pretend to go along with him."

"No."

"Got anything better?"

"I—" Wallace hesitated, then swore. "Bannerman, tell this darkhaired witch to stay off my back. Understand?"

"You'll do it?" asked David Bannerman.

Reluctantly the detective superintendent nodded.

It began with David Bannerman telephoning Vince Morton's office, using the excuse that Kennedy Fisher still wanted to do a deal but wanted to make some changes in the details. Morton wasn't friendly at first but finally agreed to a meeting on condition it was at his office and nowhere else.

The Bannermans arrived there at six P.M. Morton's young secretary had already left for the night. He opened the door himself, and stared suspiciously at Helen, who was carrying a metal-trimmed briefcase.

"Who's this?" he demanded.

"My sister," said Bannerman. "She's also my partner."

"Relatives I can do without," grunted Morton, but he beckoned them in.

He sat on the edge of a desk, leaving them to stand. "Well, what does the old fool want?"

"He's scared about doing this whisky run," said Bannerman. "He's making an alternative offer—double the cash he offered to give you you last time."

"Nothing doing," Morton dismissed the notion. "That old man's trucks and storage depots are going to be worth a lot more to me than any cash he could ever raise. No deals."

"Maybe it isn't so simple," said Helen calmly. "Suppose the police get their own line on Fisher—and don't care whether or not he's a member of Parliament? They know that Landert was killed by a bullet from what could have been a service-issue revolver. Suppose—"

"Suppose nothing," said Morton airily. "Our ship was badly damaged and practically gutted by fire during the Falklands campaign. Fisher was like me—he lost almost everything he had. Including his revolver."

"So he lost it or got rid of it." David Bannerman pretended to go along with the notion, then combed a hand through his fair hair as if still puzzled. "But

what happened at the cottage still stays hard to believe—”

“Why?” demanded Morton.

“Well, the killing is one thing,” said Bannerman. “But then burying the body under the floor in that cottage—could he really have been on his own?”

Morton frowned. “Why not?”

“We heard about the stone slabs that made up that floor,” said Helen. “But we also heard that the police doubt if any one man could have lifted heavy slabs that size by himself.”

“Forget it,” sneered Morton. “And ignore whoever told you that. Those slabs were small, no bigger than cement blocks in a garden path. They’d be no problem for anyone. And remember the letter. That’s enough evidence against Morton on its own, or it would take some shifting.”

“True,” admitted David Bannerman. “Of course, the gun would really clinch things—”

“Unless someone else could have used it,” murmured Helen.

“Forget the damned gun.” Morton eased down from the desk, a cynical grin on his face. “And you can give up trying to make out that maybe I helped Fisher kill Landert.” He slapped a hand hard on the desktop. “Nobody can get past Landert’s letter!”

“Maybe it would still be differ-

ent if the police found the gun,” said Helen stubbornly.

“What a pity it’s lost,” snarled Morton. “Not that it would make any difference to me—I never had it, never touched it. So tell Kennedy Fisher the deal stands, I want those trucks.” He turned a thumb towards the door. “Now get out, both of you. You’ve wasted enough of my time. I’ve things to do.”

Helen and her brother exchanged a glance. She gave a fractional nod.

“They’ll have to wait,” said Bannerman unemotionally. “We’ve got you on videotape, the police are outside, and you’ve just helped put a few things together.”

Startled panic flared in Vince Morton’s eyes. For a moment he froze; then, cursing, he exploded to life, grabbed a heavy ornamental vase from a small table beside the desk, and brought it round in a vicious arc aimed at the younger man’s head. David ducked the blow, but the vase still hit him hard on the shoulder and Morton started to raise it again.

“No!” Helen Bannerman took a single step forward and used her metal-framed briefcase in a fast upward swing that took Morton hard in the mouth. He screamed in a mixture of surprise and pain, dropping the vase, and as it clattered to the

floor she kned him hard in the groin.

Then it was over as her brother gripped Morton in a tight armlock and swung him face-down across the desk.

"Enough?" Helen Bannerman asked her brother.

"Enough," he agreed.

She was checking the little video camera and radio microphone concealed inside the briefcase when the office door flew open and Detective Superintendent Wallace burst in, followed by two constables. The constables grabbed Morton and unceremoniously handcuffed him.

"We heard enough of it," said Wallace, and to the dazed prisoner, "Vincent Morton, I'm arresting you for the murder of Lieutenant Paul Landert." He quickly went through the rest of the formal caution.

"You can't—I've a letter," protested Morton.

"It's over," David Bannerman told him. "You're on tape saying the slabs at the cottage floor were easy enough for one man to lift—yet you told me you'd never been there."

"Maybe I read it," said Morton desperately.

"No," said Wallace flatly. "That's never been published."

"You also said you didn't touch Fisher's revolver at any time." Bannerman eyed the man bleakly. "But it wasn't lost—

we've got it. There's a fingerprint on one cartridge which was replaced. The one you replaced after you shot Landert. Admit it."

Vince Morton protested for a spell. But after the fingerprint on the cartridge was matched against one of his own and the rest was put together, he finally confessed.

"Yet you still say that letter was genuinely written by Landert," puzzled Fraser Fisher the next afternoon. "Why did he do it? Why the lies about me?"

The M.P. had flown north to Edinburgh from London that morning, had first seen his parents, then had made yet another statement to the police. After that Helen Bannerman had picked him up at police headquarters and had driven him to the Banner Agencies' office. She'd left him with her brother, saying she'd be back.

"Morton has admitted that, and most of the rest of it," said David Bannerman. Like the M.P., he was nursing a mug of Jo-Ann's coffee. "It was his idea. Morton and Landert had been pirating naval stores in an almost wholesale way, but they knew there was an investigation under way. Landert knew he was already suspected—but

not Morton. Morton might be the brains behind the thieving, but he always kept well in the background.

"Landert was looking for as much cash as he could get; then planned to disappear. Morton offered him an extra wad of money if he'd write the letter, name you as the other man behind the thefts, and that way leave Morton in the clear."

Fraser Fisher gave a slow nod of understanding. "Except once he had the letter he decided to kill Landert—"

"As the only person who could link him with the stores thefts," Bannerman said. "He swapped your revolver with his own—all he needed was a few hours, and as long as what looked like your weapon was still with your kit, it was a chance in a million against your checking the serial number. When he was ready, he typed the note you found in your room, the note that asked you to meet Landert out on the beach."

Landert had been killed an hour before Fraser Fisher arrived for the beach meeting. He was buried under the cottage floor once Fisher grew tired of waiting and left. All that remained then was for Morton to clean Fisher's revolver, replace the used cartridge, wipe the

weapon clear of fingerprints, and return it.

"With a pretty cast-iron case created against me," grimaced the politician. "I've been lucky. His biggest mistake was overlooking that fingerprint on the cartridge. Then, when Landert's body was found—"

"He saw a chance to try blackmail," said Bannerman. "If you'd ever fired that revolver again, at the very least I know a political party that could have had a bye-election pending."

"Don't even joke about it," winced Fisher. "Not the way we stand in the opinion polls." He glanced round as the office door opened and Helen Bannerman came in. She was carrying an overnight bag, which she dumped on the floor.

"Going somewhere?" asked her brother.

"Out for a meal," said Helen easily. "With Fraser. We're on the next shuttle flight to London."

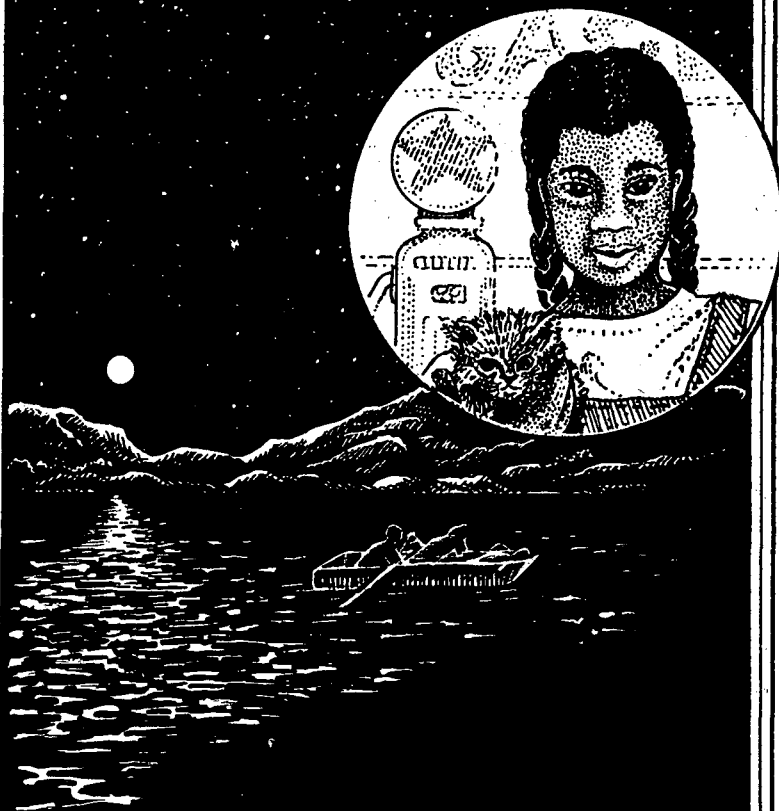
Bannerman blinked. "Sounds special."

"Could be." She grinned at her brother. "The Prime Minister is hosting a private party at Ten Downing Street."

"She'll be back tomorrow," promised Fraser Fisher.

"Don't count on it," said Helen Bannerman. And winked.

FICTION




PEACH

R. Paul Gannon

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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 In rural Alabama just south of Birmingham the Black Warrior River runs alongside U.S. Route 124. At one point the distance between the road and the river is only sixty-two feet, and at that place, in 1951, there was a house.

It was an old house even then, not very wide but it was long, and it stretched from the road to the river. At the front of the house were two gasoline pumps that were installed in 1931, which turned the house into a gas station.

Three years later a dock was built on the river side of the house, and a gasoline pump was put on the dock to service the motorboats of tourists from Tuscaloosa only a half-mile downriver.

A screened porch ran the length of one side of the house. There was a screen door on each end, one on the road side to service the road customers, and one on the river side to service the boats.

On this sagging porch, in his rocking chair, sat Calvin Briggs, "Owner and Proprietor" of the Briggs Gas Station. Cal, who was an old man, wore dirty denim overalls. His curly white hair stuck out from under a battered straw hat, and his ruddy complexion made his hair look whiter than it really was.

All day long Cal sat on his porch and watched for customers. He would go to the right for the road or to the left for the river; although he went mostly to the right, as that was where most of his customers came from. Business was good that summer of '51, and the cars and boats kept Cal hopping out of his rocking chair all day long.

Throughout the blistering summer days Cal sat on his porch when he could and sipped whisky mixed with yellow river water. It was the clay riverbed that made the water yellow. He kept a glass milk bottle filled with the water on the small table to the left of his rocking chair, and as he refilled his glass with whisky, he poured the river water in it to dilute it.

Cal thought it made the whisky taste better, and anyway it was the only water Cal had, as the house had no well and the water had to be pumped up from the river.

Late one hot afternoon Cal noticed a young black girl fishing on the riverbank next to his house. He didn't mind kids fishing on his property as long as they didn't fall in and drown.

Just before the sun went down, the girl came up to his porch carrying a bamboo fishing pole and three yellow perch on a string. She

put the fish down on a tuft of grass in the shade, dropped the pole next to them, and knocked on the river-side porch door.

Cal yelled, "Come in," and she did. She just stood there for a few seconds as if she weren't sure she wanted to be there. She was a big girl, and pretty—maybe fifteen but she looked older—and there was a sadness in her eyes that Cal had seen only in people his own age. She was wearing overalls like Cal's except that hers were clean and cut off at the knees for the summer, and her hair was pulled back in braids.

"Are you needin' any help with the gas station, Mr. Briggs," she asked, "'cause I need some summer work."

"As a matter of fact I do need some help," Cal said. "But I'm going to hire a boy to help me. You got a brother who wants a job?"

The girl stood up straighter. "I can do the same work any boy can do," she said, "and I can do it better."

By the looks of this girl, Cal thought, she probably could, too, but he didn't want any girls around. He knew women didn't like men to be drinking whisky, and he didn't want any woman nagging him about it.

"Besides, I can't pay much," Cal said, trying to dissuade her.

"That's okay, I know you'll be fair."

"How do you know that?" Cal asked.

"'Cause my mama told me."

"Do I know your mama?"

"She's Missus Pease," the girl said. "We live just up the road a bit, back in the woods," and she pointed in the general direction.

"Sure," Cal said, "I know your mama, and I knew your grandma Lydia, too. She was the prettiest girl in these parts when she was your age."

The girl's brown eyes flashed. "You mean she was the prettiest colored girl in these parts," she said.

This girl's got a mind of her own, Cal thought.

"I mean she was the prettiest girl in these parts, colored or white," he said, "and I knew your grandma since we was kids. So what's your name?"

"It's Georgia," the girl said, "but everybody calls me Peach. You know, Georgia Pease . . . Georgia *Peach*." That made Cal smile.

"So you're Amy Pease's girl, huh?"

"Yes, sir. Mama told me you'd hire me if you could."

"She did, huh?" Cal rubbed his chin. "Well . . . sure I'd hire you if it was a girl's job, but pumping gas ain't a job for a girl."

“There’s no such thing as girls’ jobs and boys’ jobs,” Peach said. “There’s just jobs.”

Cal started to squirm in his chair. If he had a girl around, he wouldn’t be able to spit or scratch or even swear, but he knew this girl wouldn’t take no for an answer.

He had no graceful way out, and he knew it.

“Well . . .” said Cal, “I guess we could try it out for a while and see how things go . . . no harm in that.”

“Thanks, Mr. Briggs,” Peach said, and she smiled so appealingly that Cal had to smile, too, in spite of himself.

“You can start tomorrow from noon till three, that’s when it’s the busiest.”

“See you tomorrow, Mr. Briggs,” she said and turned to leave.

“And call me Cal,” he called after her.

She paused at the screen door. “Okay, Cal. See you tomorrow.” Outside, she stopped to pick up her fish and the bamboo pole. By way of saying goodbye, she held the fish up for Cal to see.

“’Bye, Peach,” Cal said, but he wasn’t a happy man. How the hell do I get myself into these things, he wondered, and reached for his glass.

Peach showed up the next day and got right to work pumping gas and helping Cal out around the station. She worked hard, and after that first day Cal had to admit to himself that Peach had worked harder than any boy he’d ever hired. She’d be pumping gas in the front, and before he knew it, she’d be pumping gas out back on the dock. Sometimes it seemed to Cal she was in both places at once.

She would come to Cal to make change, and he would pull the roll of bills out of his pocket. Once she said, “Someday you’re going to get robbed, keeping your money in your pocket like that. You should get a cash register.”

“I’d rather get robbed than make a hunnerd extra trips to the porch for change,” said Cal. “Unless you think I can carry the register around with me.” Peach just shrugged and went back to work.

Later the same day she said, “You know what, Cal?”

“What?”

“It’d be real nice if you had an electric sign out front with the name of the station on it. It’d let people know that you’re open at night.”

“I got lightbulbs over the pumps. That’s enough,” Cal said. “It’s

worked just fine for twenty years now. I don't need any *electric sign*."

"Suit yourself," Peach said, "it was just an idea."

Ain't that just like a woman, Cal thought, always trying to change things. He knew it was just a matter of time before she got after him about the whisky, too.

Peach worked every day that week from noon until three, and usually she came back after supper, pretending she had forgotten to do something earlier. She would fuss with the gas pumps, wiping them down with a rag, and sweep the dock and do other unnecessary things, just to keep busy.

Cal figured she was unhappy at home and wanted to get out of the house, so he would invite her to sit on the porch with him and watch the cars and boats go by.

He was glad to have somebody around during the evenings, and to his surprise he found Peach a pleasure to talk to. One warm night after they had been sitting awhile, Peach said, "So you knew my grandma, huh?"

"Knew your grandma, and I know your mama and your pa, too," Cal said. "Your mama married Jimmy Pease."

"We ain't seen my pa in seven years," Peach said.

"I'm sorry," said Cal.

"It ain't your fault," she said. "Tell me, what was my grandma like? I don't remember her . . . she's dead now."

"I know," Cal said, "I read it in the newspaper years back." Cal settled back in his chair. "Like I said, she was the prettiest girl in these parts. In fact, you look a lot like her."

Peach looked down at the floor. "I'm not pretty," she said.

"Yes, you are, you're as pretty as she was," Cal said.

Cal thought, too, how Peach was built just like her grandma was at that age, strong and graceful. He remembered when he was young, how excited it had made him then, just watching Lydia walk. It had been years since Cal had thought about a woman in that way, but now his mind went back to those summer days many years ago when he and Lydia would go off together alone.

"She sure was pretty," Cal said. Peach smiled.

"Sounds like you were in love with her," Peach said.

"I was," said Cal. "Every boy in town was in love with her."

"Did she like you, too?"

"As a matter of fact," said Cal, "Lydia and me liked each other a lot." And then he laughed, a little self-consciously.

“Why didn’t you marry her?” Peach asked.

Cal shifted uneasily in his rocking chair. “Well,” he said, “when I told my pa how I felt about her, he nearly had a fit. Folks in these parts aren’t very tolerant about mixed marriages, and fifty years ago they were even less so.”

“Why didn’t you just run away and get married?”

Cal shrugged. “No money, no job . . . we was just kids then,” he said.

“Were you ever married?” Peach asked.

“You sure ask a lot of questions,” Cal said, but after a while he said, “No, I had a few girlfriends after that, but I never did get married.”

Peach was quiet for a few minutes, and then she started to giggle.

“What’s so funny?” Cal asked.

“I was just thinking, you could have been my grandpa.”

“What’s so funny about that? I’d be a real good grandpa.”

Peach bent over laughing.

“Well, I *would*,” Cal insisted, and Peach laughed so hard tears came to her eyes. Cal took a big sip of his whisky and river water.

That night Cal slept fitfully and was up earlier than usual the next morning. He made himself a breakfast of coffee and biscuits and ate it at the small linoleum-covered table in his kitchen. Then he shaved carefully, making sure not to miss any spots.

Cal shaved every day now that Peach was around. He looked at himself in the cracked mirror and wondered where the years had gone. It seemed like only yesterday that he and Lydia were young. He sighed and wiped the rest of the shaving lather from his face.

While he was drinking his second cup of coffee, he looked around at the house. As with most old men who live alone, his house was far from neat. He spent the next hour cleaning it up except for the spare room, which was piled high with old newspapers. He took an armload of the papers out and dropped them into the trash barrel in front of the house.

If he did that once a week, he figured, the room would be empty in a year or two. Still, it was a step in the right direction. As he washed the few dishes he had used, he looked out the kitchen window at the dock and the river, peaceful in the morning light.

His old rowboat was still there, tied to the dock. This Sunday he would have to bail it out and do some fishing. Maybe Peach would like to go with him, he thought. He hadn’t had fish in a long time.

By noon the sun had become so hot it burned the color out of the land, and the air was so still that not even a leaf stirred in the trees. Peach showed up that afternoon with her left eye swollen. Cal could see her trying to hide it by turning away whenever he looked at her.

Finally he had to ask. "What happened to your eye, Peach?" She bent her head.

"Jones hit me." She said it so quietly Cal wasn't sure he'd heard right.

"Who's Jones?" asked Cal.

"He's my mama's boyfriend, and he's real nasty."

"Your mama's boyfriend hit you?"

"Yeah, he's a real gentleman, Jones is."

"That son of a bitch," Cal said. "He ought to be horsewhipped."

"He probably wouldn't notice," Peach said. "He's always drunk."

"Why doesn't your mama run him off?"

"'Cause she needs what little money he brings home when he works. She's been having a bad time ever since Pa left."

"It's a damn shame," Cal said, "a *damn* shame."

Peach was quiet for the rest of the afternoon, just going about her work and keeping to herself. Cal didn't know what to say to her after that, so he sat in his rocking chair and said nothing. It was too hot even to drink whisky, so he made up a gallon jug of iced tea. Peach said it was the best she'd ever had.


The station wasn't busy that afternoon because of the heat, so Peach and Cal sat on the porch, drinking iced tea and watching the boats on the river. Later, after Peach had left, Cal wondered if she would come back again after supper. He hoped she would, he enjoyed her company.

That evening huge rainclouds rolled in from the west. Just as the first large drops started to fall, Peach came up to the porch and let herself in. She didn't bother pretending she had some work to do, she just walked over and sat in the chair next to Cal.

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes, they just sat and watched the rain. After a while Peach said, "At least this will cool it off."

"Yeah," Cal agreed, "it feels good." Now that the heat was gone, he reached for his whisky bottle and poured some into his glass.

He was adding the yellow river water when Peach said, "That stuff will rot your liver, you know."



He took a sip. "Ain't got no liver," he said. "The doctor took it out in '49."

Peach gave him a level look. "You can't live without a liver," she said.

"Can if you're mean enough," said Cal.

"You ain't mean, Cal, you're just ornery." They both had to laugh at that. The rain was getting heavier now, and the roof began to leak. Cal reached under the table, took out a battered tin pot, and put it under the drip. "The roof leaks," Peach said, as if Cal hadn't noticed.

"I know that."

"Why don't you fix it?"

"'Cause I'm too old to climb the ladder, that's why."

"Then I'll fix it," she said.

"You can if you want to. The ladder and the tar can are under the porch."

"I'll fix it tomorrow," Peach said, "when it dries up. It won't leak any more after that."

"That's what I said the last time I fixed it," Cal said.

It rained again the following day, and the humidity was stifling. Peach came to work carrying a ball of tan fur in her arms. When she got closer, Cal saw it was a tabby kitten.

"See what I found," she said and held the kitten up for Cal see.

It was a tiny kitten, barely weaned from the mother, Cal guessed. It had large blue eyes, big ears, and a white muzzle and bib. Its paws were white also, and it had white rings on its tail. Cal thought it was the cutest thing he'd ever seen. He patted the kitten's tiny head. "He sure is a cute little guy," he said.

"It's a girl," said Peach, "and I haven't figured out a name for her yet." Cal found a cardboard box and cut it down to make a litter box, and Peach filled it with sand. They set it up on the porch along with a small bowl of water and a saucer with mashed-up tuna from a can Cal had in his cupboard.

Peach put the kitten down on the porch floor. It sniffed the litter box and then climbed in. It dug a hollow spot in the sand with its paws and squatted down to pee.

Cal sat in his rocker and grinned at the kitten. "She looks like a little angel," he said. The kitten covered the wet spot with sand and then went straight to the saucer of tuna and began to nibble at it.

The rain was beginning to let up by then, and they listened to the

water dripping off the leaves. The air was cooler now, almost refreshing.

"Damn, it was hot this morning," Peach said, stretching her arms.

"That's not very nice language for a young lady to use," Cal said. Peach laughed.

"I guess you're right, Cal," she said. "If I was a lady, I wouldn't talk like that."

"Well you *shouldn't* talk like that," said Cal, "and you *are* a lady, whether you know it or not." Peach turned to look at him.

"Thank you, Cal," she said.

"You're welcome," said Cal, and he picked up the kitten.

It was getting dark, and they couldn't see through the screens except where the lights were, over the gas pump on the dock and out front.

Peach looked at Cal and the kitten and said, "Cal, why don't you name the kitten?"

"But it's your kitten, you should be the one to name her."

"You can keep her if you want to," Peach said.

"You mean it, I can keep her?"

"Yes, you can have her."

"But I couldn't take your kitten from you," Cal said.

"It's okay. I can see her every day when I'm working here, and anyway, I don't think my mama would let me keep it. She's got enough mouths to feed now, with my little sister and me."

"I didn't know you had a sister."

"Eloise," Peach said, "she's eight." But Cal didn't seem to be listening. He lifted the kitten up with both hands and kissed the top of its head.

"Thanks, Peach," he said. "I'll take good care of her."


Suddenly they heard someone step on a branch outside in the darkness.

"Who's there?" yelled Cal.

A drunken voice came back at them. "Peach," the voice said, "you get out here right now." Cal put the kitten down, jumped out of his chair, and headed for the door. He knew it was Jones outside.

"Be careful!" Peach said as Cal went out the door.

Jones was weaving back and forth, trying to keep his balance. He was a slightly built black man. His shirt was unbuttoned to the waist, and his pants looked about ready to fall down. He glared defiantly at Cal.



"What do you want her for?" Cal asked.

"None of your damn business!" said Jones.

"I'm making it my business," Cal said and walked up closer to Jones.

Lowering his voice, Cal said, "Listen to me, if you ever hit Peach again, I'll put the sheriff on you, and he'll put you away for a long time. Do you understand that?"

Jones weaved back and forth as he tried to absorb what Cal had said. Finally he staggered back a step and said, "You wouldn't do that."

"You bet your ass I would," said Cal.

"It's jes' your word against mine."

"And who do you think the sheriff will believe, a white man or a colored man?" Cal asked.

Jones thought that over for a few seconds. "Well anyway," he said, "her mama wants her home."

Cal thought Jones sounded more reasonable now. He turned toward the porch and said, "Peach, your mama wants you home, so you'd better go." Peach came off the porch and walked up to the men.

"It's all right, Cal," she said, "it's time I went home anyway."

"Goodnight, Peach," Cal said.

"Goodnight, Cal. See you tomorrow."

Cal watched as Peach and Jones headed into the woods, taking the shortcut to Peach's house, and then he went back on the porch and sat down. He was worried about Peach. He wondered if she was able to handle Jones when he was drunk and if Jones would hit her again.

Just as he was reaching for the kitten, he heard Peach scream in pain. He was down the porch stairs before the door had slammed shut and ran as fast as he could toward the sound.

Peach was screaming louder now, and Cal could hear Jones's punches echoing off her body. "Son-of-a-bitch!" Cal said as he rushed towards them.

Cal grabbed Jones from behind and tried to pull him away from Peach, but Jones turned and seized Cal by the neck, digging his thumbs into Cal's throat and choking him until Cal thought he was going to pass out. He pulled at Jones's hands, but he wasn't strong enough to pull them off.

Just as he was losing consciousness, he felt Jones's grip loosen,

and he fell backwards with Jones on top of him—but Jones was no longer moving. Peach bent down, pushed Jones off him, and helped Cal to get up.

“Are you all right?” she asked, but Cal wasn’t able to talk. He just stood there wheezing. Peach stooped down to look at Jones. When she stood up again, Cal was able to talk a little.

“What happened?” he asked. “Did he pass out?”

“No,” said Peach quietly, “I hit him with a rock.”

Cal felt Jones’s neck for a pulse. There was none. Jones wasn’t breathing. Cal struggled to his feet and looked at Peach. “He’s dead,” he said simply.

“I know,” said Peach, and she started to cry.

Cal was dazed. He didn’t know what to do. He looked around at the wet trees, the water dripping from the leaves; it all seemed unreal.

“It was self-defense,” Cal said. Then he realized what they both already knew—Peach was in trouble.

“Peach, stop crying,” Cal said, “and help me carry Jones down to the dock.” Peach stopped crying and wiped her eyes. Cal squatted down and grabbed Jones under the arms while Peach took the feet. In silence they struggled toward the dock with Jones’s lifeless body between them.

The woods were thick with mosquitoes after the rain, but Cal and Peach couldn’t swat at them as they carried Jones, so they just let them bite. When they were close enough to the dock, Cal stopped, and they laid Jones down on the riverbank.

Cal had to sit down and rest for a minute. He pulled a soiled rag out of his back pocket and wiped his forehead with it.

“Peach, go up on the dock and untie my rowboat,” Cal said, “and bring it over here.”

Peach climbed up on the dock, and in a few seconds Cal could see her holding onto the tie rope, drawing the boat along the front of the dock. Then she pulled it down the side of the dock until the boat ran up on the sand near Cal’s feet.

Cal stepped into the water and swung the boat around, turning the prow out toward the river. There was six inches of water in the bottom.

“There’s a coffee can in the boat somewhere,” Cal said. “See if you can find it, and bail the boat out.”

Peach got in, found the can, and started to bail. Cal went over to

Jones and stuck his hands into all of Jones's pockets. He found only a couple of coins, which he threw into the water. Next he checked Jones's hands for a watch or rings. There were none.

"Didn't he carry a wallet?" Cal asked.

"I never saw him use one," Peach said.

She bailed most of the water out of the boat and went ashore.

"All right, now help me put him in the boat," Cal said.

Together they picked Jones up and laid him in the stern with his head resting on the transom. Cal stepped over Jones and sat down on the middle bench. Peach followed and sat beside him. They used the oars to push away from the shore, and then they set them into the oarlocks and started to row. Once out into the current, they rowed upriver against it so they wouldn't be carried downstream.

They rowed in silence until Peach asked, "Am I going to jail, Cal?"

"Nobody's going to jail," Cal said. "We're going to dump him in midstream. By the time they find him, he'll be five miles downriver."

"But they'll know who he is," Peach said, "and they'll come around asking questions."

"I hope they won't find him for a few days," Cal said, "and by then the fish will have been feeding on him. They probably won't be able to identify him at all. Even if they are, they'll just think he was drunk and fell in and hit his head on a rock."

"I hope so," Peach said, "'cause I sure don't want to go to jail."

When they reached midstream, Cal dropped his oar into the bottom of the boat, and Peach did the same with hers.

"Okay," Cal said, "let's do it fast so we won't get dragged too far downriver. Be careful not to tip the boat."

Together they pushed Jones over the transom. They watched as he sank below the surface; then they sat down again, picked up their oars, and started rowing back toward the dock. The current had carried them ten yards downstream, and they had to row with all their strength to get back.

Peach was the first one onto the dock. She grabbed the tie rope and secured it. She had to help Cal out of the boat, and together they walked back to the porch. Once inside, Cal flopped down in his rocking chair, and Peach sat in the chair beside him.

"Now remember, Peach," Cal said, "neither one of us has seen Jones tonight. If anybody should ask, we just sat here on the porch and watched the rain, and we didn't see a soul . . . all right?"

“All right, Cal,” Peach said. “We didn’t see anybody.”

Cal picked up the kitten and sat there petting it.

“You’d better get home now, Peach,” he said, “before your mama starts to worry about you.”

Peach stood up. “I guess you’re right,” she said. “Thanks, Cal, for helping me.”

“No thanks needed,” Cal said. “You saved my life.”

Peach stopped at the porch door and turned. “See you tomorrow?” she asked.

“Of course,” said Cal. “We’ve got a lot of work to do. We have to fix the roof, remember?” Peach smiled and waved goodbye.

Cal sat there in his rocking chair, too tired to move. There was a cool breeze blowing now, and the kitten was asleep in his lap. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

He was just nodding off when the sound of a car horn startled him, and he remembered the lights were still on over the front gas pumps. Groaning, he put the kitten down and pushed himself up. He trudged across the porch and out to the large gray Packard that waited there with its engine off and its lights out.

The fat man behind the wheel took the cigar out of his mouth and said, “Fill it up, high-test.”

“Right,” Cal said and unscrewed the gas cap. He stuck the nozzle into the filler pipe and squeezed the trigger. As he waited, he watched the the small red and yellow plastic balls swirl around inside the glass bubble on the front of the pump.

When the tank was full, the gas started to spurt up out of the filler pipe. Cal released the trigger and put the nozzle back into the side of the pump. Then he put the cap back on and screwed it tight. “Want me to check your oil?” he asked.

“Naw, it’s okay,” the man said.

Cal took the rag out of his back pocket and wiped the gasoline from his hands. “That’ll be seven dollars and thirty-five cents,” he said.


The man took a five and two ones from his wallet and handed them to Cal. Then he reached into his pants pocket and fished out the change and handed that to Cal also.

“Thanks,” Cal said. “Come by again.”

“By the way,” said the man, “could you use a kid to help you out around the station for the summer? My kid’s looking for a job.”

“I already got somebody,” Cal said.

“Oh yeah, I’ve seen that colored girl out here pumping gas.”



"That's right," said Cal, "that's Peach."

"She's a real pretty thing, too," the man said, "but my kid's husky, strong as an ox. He could do a better job for you than a girl could."

"Peach does just fine," said Cal, "... just fine." He felt something brush up against his ankle and looked down. It was the kitten. He stooped down and picked it up. "How did you get out?" he said. He held it in his arms and petted it, and it purred loudly.

Then Cal looked at the man and said, "Maybe you *could* help me with something, though."

"What's that?" the man asked. Cal looked up at the lights over the gas pumps, their tin shades more rust than paint.

"Do you know where I could get an electric sign made up?" he asked.

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FICTION

THE PERFECT WIFE

Mary Goudin



Illustration by Jason C. Eckhardt

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/97

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If I buried him out in the yard, the city would undoubtedly decide to dig up the sewers. If I poisoned him, some bureaucrat would decide the county was behind on the autopsy quota. Milton excelled at causing me problems. It was his only talent.

It is difficult to describe Milton precisely. A thumbnail sketch would have to include sullen, mean, lazy, mean, moody, mean, scruffy, and all the sparkle of a potted plant with root rot.

Although he regularly received horrific shocks from the electronic equipment repairs he insisted he was qualified to perform, he refused to cooperate and die from them. Following the buzzing and attendant gurgling noises on his part, and soaring hopes on mine, he would flop around like a wounded trout and say, "Whoa, man, that was a close one." Never quite close enough to suit me, however.

I married Milton during a particularly desperate bout of anxiety and alcoholism, convinced the man of my dreams would never appear. In a way, the marriage worked out for me, for Milton drove all notions of romance from my soul for a good long time. Following a severe scare over a liver condition, I gave up drinking after three

years of marriage, took a good hard look at Milton, and cried for two days straight.

I discovered his idea of humor when I broached the subject of an annulment. "No way, meal ticket," he said after laughing in my face. He belched and opened another beer. "You wanna go, you leave me the money and you split."

Hence my predicament.

By the time I was of marriageable age, Uncle Gaynor had grown weary of seeing chunks of the family estate disappear, clutched in the sweaty fists of various family members' ex-spouses. One Tuesday morning he suddenly summoned the estate lawyers and directed that certain changes be made to our allowance distribution conditions. On Thursday of that week he signed the new papers, went home, and most inconsiderately died in his sleep that very night of what the doctors later labeled dyspepsia. Or diabetes, I forget.

Now, had he been alive, even Uncle Gaynor would have made an exception and allowed me to divorce Milton. (Or at least had him professionally removed, so to speak, a talent in which I am sadly lacking.)

In any event, the upshot was that I had no court of last resort before which to plead my case. If I divorced Milton, I lost my share of the inheritance.

As dissatisfied partners are prone to do, my next move was to try to change him. I believe he may actually have enjoyed the ensuing furor; I was the one crying and screaming. He calmly drank beer, smirked, and then disappeared with his friends for days at a time.

This nonsense lasted close to six months and could have easily continued well into eternity had not Milton himself inadvertently shown me the path to freedom.

It was a Friday morning when he staggered through the door at four twenty A.M., reeking and red-eyed. I was hysterical, more at the lack of control I had over him than from any genuine concern for his well-being. The Miltons of this world are rarely the victims of accidents, only the cause.

"Where have you been?" I screamed. "Do you know what time it is?"

He slammed the front door with an actual display of energy. "Shut the hell up!" he yelled. "My friends are here. You don't yell at me when my friends are here! You got that?" He stormed back out of the house and left me staring openmouthed at the door.

Right then and there I knew what to do.

That afternoon, when Milton climbed out of bed and wan-

dered into the kitchen for his first beer of the day, he stopped dead in the doorway as though struck by a board. "What the hell is this?" he snarled, instantly suspicious.

"Good morning, darling," I chirped. Shelving the attendant nausea, I kissed his unshaven (and unwashed) cheek. "Did you sleep well?"

He pushed away as if I were the unwashed one. "I said what is this, Jadine," he repeated.

"Why, it's your breakfast, darling," I bustled about, thinking Betty Crocker, Betty Crocker. Poured the juice, buttered the toast. He remained stock-still in the doorway, staring at the bacon sizzling on the stove, the plate of eggs and pancakes I removed from the warming oven. "Sit down, dear, it will get cold."

"What's this all about?" He moved to sit at the table, apparently deciding the food wouldn't suddenly leap from the plates to attack him. Adapting to new situations was not one of Milton's strong points.

"I told you, darling, it's your breakfast," I said, placing the plate of bacon next to the juice. "Now eat, dear." I stopped just short of ruffling his hair. There is, after all, such a thing as going too far.

For the next week I cooked and served meals, smiled cheerfully, waited up without nag-

ging. Milton was suspicious and surly, which changed his basic personality very little. Then one morning while he was eating blueberry muffins and eggs Benedict, (washed down with *domestic* beer), I said casually, "By the way, I've invited Betsy and Bert over this evening, so you'll need to be home by six thirty."

I had carefully chosen my words for maximum effect, and Milton did not disappoint me. He sputtered like a worn-out tire. "What do you mean I have to be home by six thirty? I'll come home when I damn well feel like coming home and not a minute before! Don't you tell me when I need to be home! And what do you mean—you invited Betsy and Bert over? They're *my* friends, and you hate my friends. What are you trying to pull, Jadine?"

"Why, nothing, Milty. I don't hate your friends. Honest. I thought the four of us could do something together, go to the club or swim or something. I only want you to be happy, dear."

"Don't call me Milty," he snarled, "and leave my friends alone."

Betsy and Bert were only forty-five minutes late. Tense and uneasy at first (Milton, of course, was a no-show), steady refills of vodka with rye chasers quickly thawed them out. They

appeared to share none of Milton's confusion over whom the family money actually belonged to and were consequently thrilled to be so close to the source of the fountain. So to speak.

It was easy to win them over. After the instant friendship fueled by the vodka and rye ice-breakers, I simply sat back and exhibited total fascination with every word they uttered. I had made no previous effort to get to know them better, believing us to be worlds apart. That evening I discovered I was right. Betsy was an unemployed topless dancer whose tastes ran to velvet paintings of Elvis, and Bert was a drinker in topless bars whose tastes ran to—well, to whatever held still, to be crude.

The three of us were the best of friends when Milton eventually stumbled through the door. "Hey, dude, where you been?" Bert shouted, sloshing his drink on Grandmama's East Persian rug.

"Out," Milton snapped, ferret eyes shifting among the three of us. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Your ole lady invited us, man. What else would we be doing here?" Bert answered, still sober enough to be puzzled.

"Yeah, well, *I* didn't invite you. And I didn't know you were coming." The eyes swung over to me.

"Milty darling," I said sweetly, "I told you this morning at breakfast. Don't you remember?"

Betsy and Bert sat looking at him quizzically. Was there the slightest bit of doubt in Bert's eyes?

Milton remembered all right. Caught between being told what to do by a woman and looking like a jerk in front of his friends, the ferret eyes glinted murderously at me. Had we been alone, he would've belted me. As it was, all he could do was yell at me to quit calling him Milty, mumble something about a headache and incipient flu, and stagger off to bed. Much to my relief, we called it a night shortly thereafter.

In the coming weeks I continued to entertain his friends, cook, smile sweetly, and wait up late patiently without complaining. I bought him his favorite magazines, gritting my teeth at the looks from the cashiers as I paid for *Tattooed Girlies* and *Mystical Mamas*.

To be honest, there were times I despaired of the plan's ever working. I thought at first he'd just leave. But as the weeks dragged by and he showed no signs of packing, I leaned seriously towards solutions of the homicidal variety, the consequences be damned. But then

Milton would look a little more hangdog than usual, and I'd cheer up and vow to hold on a while longer.

It was an evening in March when I overheard Bert talking out on the patio and knew I was progressing. "Milt, I don't get it. You got a cool ole lady. Why are you so mean, man?"

Milton muttered something under his breath that I didn't quite catch, but I knew then that I was getting to him. He was looking bad in front of his friends. I had shamed him into two choices: walk away from me (and my money) or grow up and act like a civilized human being. As I had suspected, both options horrified him. Without me to rebel against and put in my place, who could Milton be? He wasn't smart or talented or even very nice. If he gave up being an unwashed, misunderstood rebel, he'd lose his entire personality.

Most appropriately, I have always thought, Milton chose a gorgeous spring evening for my liberation. It was Bert who found him hanging from the giant oak in the back yard.

The suicide note was short, the best way for Milton to be sure all the words were spelled right. It simply read, "Jadine is the perfect wife."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Who *was* that masked man anyway? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

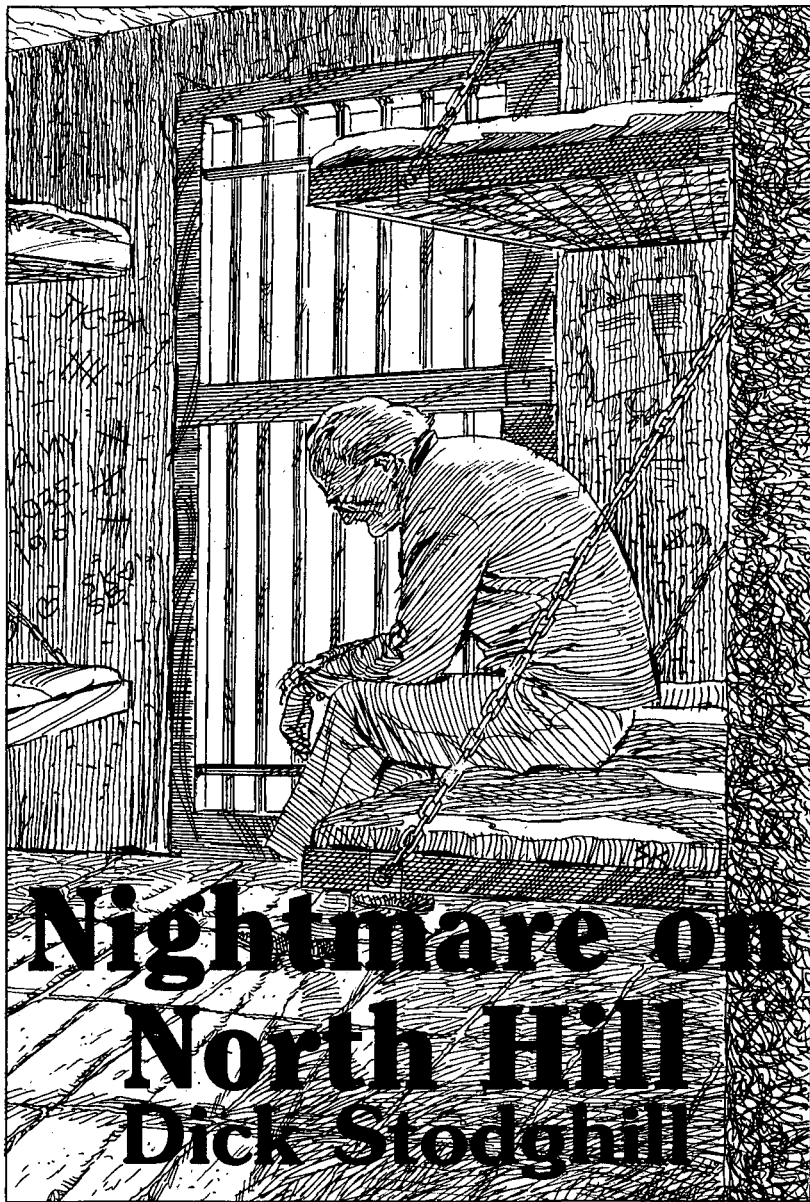


Illustration by Sam Kveskin

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/97

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**W**e were discussing spring training, wondering if Lou Gehrig was beginning to slow down and if Bob Feller, the rifle-armed high school kid from Iowa, might lead the Indians to a pennant, when Jack Eddy casually mentioned that he had taken on the case of Pop Bannister.

I was shocked. Bannister was on death row at the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus, his date with Old Sparky only two weeks away. Further proof, I thought, that Jack Eddy was the sort of man who would do anything for money or publicity that might further his career. Preferably publicity. In the eleven months since he had taken a room at Mrs. Bauer's boarding-house on Dudley Street I had found Jack Eddy totally ruthless in going after the thing that mattered most to him, moving up the ladder at Wellington's National Detective Agency. During that time he had risen from operative to assistant manager at the Akron office, which didn't begin to satisfy him. He wanted to be top dog at one of the thirty-three branches, then have a private office on mahogany row at the agency's New York headquarters.

As police reporter for the Akron *Times-Press* I had enjoyed a closeup view of his methods. He had used me in every

possible way, taken advantage of my connections, pumped me for inside information. At times I resented this but always went along with it. For selfish reasons, so I suppose we had more in common than I liked to believe. Whatever, acting as his stooge had led me to some great stories, enabled me to scoop the competition on numerous occasions.

My first words once the shock had worn off were "You can't be serious, Jack. It was an open-and-shut case. The jury came back with a verdict in twenty minutes. Besides, it happened in the summer of 1936, nearly two years ago, so what can you hope to find out now? Another thing; who's footing the bill? As I remember it, the old guy didn't even have the money to pay his attorney."

"That's what convinced me to take it on."

"What, that he was broke? Look, Jack, this wasn't your run-of-the-mill murder. Bannister killed an innocent young woman in cold blood, then stuffed her body in a furnace to cover his tracks. My God, the man's a monster."

"Are you finished, friend? Is the sermon over, has the collection plate been passed? Is it okay now for me to tell you what I meant?"

When I nodded, he said, "I

was talking about another matter with his lawyer, Amos Dooby, when Dooby told me he's been working on the case free gratis all this time but is running out of hope. Then just jokingly he said he was a topnotch lawyer but right now would trade all his courtroom skills for my knowhow as an investigator."

"And after this lathering-on of compliments I suppose you told him you'd be glad to lend a hand, also free gratis. For crying out loud, Jack, you were conned by an expert."

"Look, smart guy, would you care to hear why a lawyer would donate his services the way Dooby has? Think of it a minute, a lawyer working for nothing. That's more astonishing than having Eleanor Roosevelt come out in favor of free love or repealing the child labor laws."

I was curious but used a shrug to feign uninterest. "Okay, I haven't heard a good fairy tale for a long time."

"It's like this, Dooby and Bannister have been friends since they were kids. Grew up next door to each other right here in East Akron back when it was still called Middlebury. They had dinner together at La Paix a couple of hours after the murder took place. Do you think Dooby wouldn't have recognized the

signs if his old friend had just killed somebody?"

"That's it? A couple of old geezers get together for a meal, and because one doesn't break down and confess to murder, it proves he's innocent? I can see Dooby convincing himself of that, but you, Jack, I thought you'd been around too much to fall for something so ridiculous."

"Look, sport, no one can top me when it comes to judging character. Dooby may be getting up there, but he's nobody's fool. In the morning he's going to show me everything he's got on Bannister, but what I want to do right now is run down to the *Times-Press* so you can dig out the file on the case."

"Sorry, Jack, I'm picking up Sue Baney in twenty minutes. We're going to that show at the Colonial."

"It can wait. Tell her you'll take her tomorrow."

"You don't just break a date that way at the last minute. Anyway, I'm taking Artie Bauer to an East High basketball game tomorrow night."

"You know, buddy, you must have the busiest social calendar in Akron. Okay, I'll tell you what. I'll follow you and Sue downtown, then we'll run into the paper and you can pull the file for me. You go on to the movie and when I'm finished I'll leave the folder on your desk."



I should have known it would end that way. Once Jack Eddy's mind was set on something, you might just as well have tried reasoning with a bulldog that had sunk his teeth into the seat of your pants. If tenacity was an investigator's strong suit, Jack would soon be running the entire agency.

Sue Baney wasn't pleased when I pulled to the curb in front of the *Times-Press* building at Exchange and High streets. "You didn't tell me we had to stop here first," she said. "I don't want to arrive after the main feature starts."

"I won't be a minute, Sue. I just have to pull a file." I didn't mention that it was for Jack Eddy, knowing how Sue disapproved of him, believed he was a bad influence on me. My attempt at playing coy fell flat; as I was walking around the car, Jack swung his big Auburn sedan into the space ahead, honking his horn and waving as if we somehow might fail to notice him.

Sue opened her door and started to get out, in her haste causing my heart to skip a beat by showing more leg than usual. "Bram Geary, if you think I'm going to sit here waiting while you and that Jack Eddy—"

She was cut off by Jack's friendly, "Hi, kid." He thrust a paper bag toward her. "Here's

something to enjoy during the show."

Two packages of Necco wafers and a Clark bar, her favorites. How had he known that? Sue murmured a weak thank you and drew her legs back inside the car.

The file was on my desk in the morning, reminding me again of the day I had performed the most onerous task facing a reporter: knocking on a door and asking the bereaved for a photo of an accident or crime victim. Staring up from page one of the old newspaper was the picture I had obtained, one of a dark-haired young woman. A plain-Jane at first glance but on closer examination a little pretty. Shy, introverted, yet still attractive. The kind of girl brought up to believe that satisfaction should be found in church, not a theater or a dance hall. Instead it was death that Sarah Kleiner had found in church.

It was a pleasantly warm June afternoon when at three o'clock she had gone to a large church on Akron's North Hill to practice the organ music she would play during Sunday service. When she failed to return to her York Street home for supper, a search was launched by her family. The following day the Akron police joined in and quickly solved the mystery.

Starting about four o'clock neighbors had noticed smoke pouring from the church's high chimney. Despite the temperature outside they had paid it little heed until detectives began asking questions. Dental records confirmed that the remains of a body found in the furnace were those of Sarah Kleiner. The coroner had little else to work with, so the autopsy, such as it was, proved nothing.

Pop Bannister was arrested and charged the following day. The janitor, a widower, said he had left the church shortly after noon the day of the murder, walked to his modest home on Carpenter Street, and remained there until it was time to catch a six o'clock bus headed downtown. Two people recalled seeing him walking home; no one had seen him the rest of the day.

The Reverend Thomas Yarger said only four keys existed to the church's side door. He had one, Bannister another, and the two remaining were in the possession of Sarah Kleiner and the choir director, a man with the unlikely name of Simon Pourficté. The first time I heard it I vowed that never again would I complain because my parents, long dead now in an auto accident, had given me a name impossible to live up to, Abraham Lincoln Geary. Even Lincoln's

staunchest admirers never claimed he was perfect.

Neither Yarger nor Pourficté could produce anyone able to verify their whereabouts from three to five on the afternoon of the murder. It wasn't important; in those days who would have suspected a minister or a choir director? Yarger claimed to have taken the afternoon off to go fishing on the banks of the Cuyahoga River near an area known as the Chuckery. A century earlier someone had been touting a new community on the site, a town to be called Summit City. A potential investor asked a nearby resident what the population of Summit City happened to be, and the man replied, "Ten thousand. One human being and nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine woodchucks." While the proposed Summit City died aborning and was quickly forgotten, most Akronites could tell you where to find the Chuckery.

Despite the fact that carp were about the only thing swimming in the Cuyahoga in 1936 and few people were enthusiastic about eating them, Yarger's explanation was accepted. As for Pourficté, he said he was in Cleveland browsing through used book stores in search of old hymnals and religious sheet music. For all the people who

remembered him he might as well have been on the moon. In fairness, Pourficté was the sort of person who could have walked past a thousand people and thirty seconds later, if asked about him, they would all have replied, "Man? What man?" He was that forgettable.

Not that it mattered; the police had already zeroed in on Pop Bannister. One reason was that no one else was familiar with the furnace and its operation. Dooby, Pop's lawyer, had rightfully argued that aside from being larger the coal-fired furnace was little different from those found in nearly every house in Akron and the rest of the country. No one paid attention, minds were already made up.

At that time it wasn't considered proper to discuss such things, at least not in mixed company, so motive was seldom talked about. Everyone knew, of course, and the fact that it was an elderly man and a young woman made it all the more revolting. Guilty or innocent, Pop Bannister was convicted from the first day onward. People who had always liked him began remembering his strange and sinister actions, such as chasing away the kids who had broken a stained-glass window and from then on refusing to allow them to play ball in the small lot be-

side the church. Or paying little attention to people but feeding every stray dog and cat on North Hill.

Doubters, and there were only a few, were always answered with one question: if not Bannister, then who? Surely not a man of the cloth. Surely not a choir director. And the premise that only four keys existed was taken as gospel, so to speak. The idea that Sarah Kleiner might have opened the door to someone was broached by Bannister's lawyer but ignored. Nor at the time was any consideration given to the first point raised by Jack Eddy when I stopped by his office in the Metropolitan Building after he had gone over Amos Dooby's material: "It's a big church, buddy. Anyone could have been hiding inside for hours, even days."

Jack was on the verge of driving out to talk to the Reverend Yarger at the rectory next door to the church, so I rode along. The man was still as I remembered him, large, awkward, and untidy, a boisterous back-slapper, the kind with a certain appeal to those less forward and outgoing. He told us nothing new but reluctantly admitted that someone could have been hiding in the church with little fear of discovery.

"Did anyone ever come with her when she practiced?" asked Jack.



"No, of course not. Sarah wasn't that sort of girl."

"What sort's that?"

"One who would bring a man along."

"Who said anything about a man?"

"Surely you're not implying a woman was responsible?"

"I'm not implying anything, chief. Look, you all used the side door to come and go, but what about the front door? I thought churches were always open so people could pray and light candles, stuff like that."

"I believe you're thinking of Roman Catholics," replied Yarger in the tone he might have used in speaking of Attila the Hun and his hordes. Or of Jack Eddy, because Yarger had obviously taken an instant dislike to him. "We might have done the same at one time as well, but in this day and age we keep the doors locked and barred."

"Suppose someone knocked on the back door, could Sarah have heard the knocking from the bench at the organ?"

Rather than answering, Yarger took us across the yard to the church so we could see, or hear, for ourselves. They left me standing outside to pound on the door, which I did repeatedly until they came back and said it was no use, they hadn't heard a thing.

"You were up by the organ,

right? How do you know she might not have been here just inside the door?"

"For what possible purpose?" Yarger asked condescendingly.

"To let her boyfriend in," said Jack. "Or because she had just come in herself."

Jack hadn't mentioned his next step, but I felt sure it was paying a visit to Simon Pourficté. He was saved the trouble by the man's arrival. If there are such things as generic faces and personalities, Simon Pourficté possessed both. Even his own dog probably didn't remember him when he arrived home at night.

Jack asked the expected questions. As I listened to the answers, the title for a book about Pourficté leaped to mind: *The Man Who Knew Nothing*.

Jack's final question was put to both Yarger and Pourficté: "Do you think Pop Bannister should get the chair?"

Their answers, if either included one somewhere among the verbiage, made me wonder why both weren't in politics.

We had wasted the better part of an hour, at least in my opinion, but as we drove back downtown, Jack Eddy was exuberant. "I told you, buddy," he said. "I told you there was more to this business than meets the eye."

"Like what, for Pete's sake?"

He laughed and gave me a one-knuckle punch on the arm that brought tears to my eyes. "You're a card, friend. You can be kidding around and sound so serious you almost have me fooled."

Kidding around? If someone had been, it wasn't me.

**"L**ook, Artie, just take my word for it." As I spoke, a March wind from hell was propelling us eastward along Market Street, enough of an irritant in itself without lip from a kid. "It doesn't matter how they pronounce it in Kentucky, in Ohio there's no Louie in Louisville."

Like most kids of twelve, Artie Bauer resisted any onslaught against his ignorance. We were bound for Goodyear Gym and the second night of the 1938 sectional basketball tournament. Starting at six o'clock, five games were scheduled fifty minutes apart, and in one of them our team, the East High Orientals, would play Louisville, a small town east of Canton.

Mrs. Bauer, being the good mother and landlady that she was, had packed sandwiches and a Thermos of hot chocolate for us. Grumbling all the while, however. She couldn't understand why we had to leave an hour before suppertime when

East didn't play until eight thirty.

"There'll be a big crowd," I told her. "We want to be sure of getting good seats."

"Won't some of those whose teams lose in the first three games leave early?"

She had a point, of course. Explaining that we wanted to see *all* the games would have been fruitless. Mrs. Bauer understood Artie's interest but felt there was something strange about a man of twenty-four who enjoyed watching a bunch of high school boys run around in short pants and undershirts.

It was a ten minute walk past lunchrooms, beer joints, pool halls, a theater, the East Akron Cemetery, and, across the street, Goodyear Plant One. To the west was a cheap hotel and vibrant business district. A man could enjoy a full life without ever leaving the neighborhood, even when he died.

Artie and I joined an impatient crowd waiting on the sidewalk until the doors opened. They opened outward, of course, and the crowd was packed tightly against them. There was an interesting moment or two when those inside began pushing while the people outside couldn't give ground because others behind them were pressing forward. I knew from experience that small people were at a dis-



advantage, so I kept Artie in front of me and maintained a firm grip on his shoulders. A nearby woman about his size was less fortunate, being gradually squeezed upward until she towered above the mob, all the time beating at heads with her purse and shouting, "Let me down!"

East easily defeated a Louisville team long on spirit, short on talent. We stayed for most of the Ravenna-Stow game, so it was past ten when we arrived home. After a lecture from Mrs. Bauer on the evils of keeping a young boy out so late I climbed the stairs and knocked on the door of Jack Eddy's room. He was stretched out in his street clothes but swung his legs off the bed as I entered.

"Keep your hat on, buddy," he said. "We're going out to see the Kleiners."

"At *this* hour?"

"They're expecting us."

My protests of being tired and having to get up early went unheeded. We took my new four-year-old olive green Hupmobile, allowing Jack to sit back, hands locked behind his head, mouth going a mile a minute. We followed the short route through the mist-shrouded valley at Old Forge, up the steep Dan Street hill and east on Tallmadge Avenue past North High, arriving at the Kleiner residence in fif-

teen minutes. The porch light was on, and as we climbed the steps, the pebbled-glass front door was opened by Matthew Kleiner, the victim's father. He was a big man, close to my own six three but bent and haggard from thirty years of leaning over machinery at Star Drill.

The same years that had given Matthew Kleiner his stoop had added too many pounds to his wife Edina. The woman sat rigidly in a chair beside a gas fireplace with a large crucifix mounted above it. A younger man with the same tightlipped, unforgiving expression as his parents arose from a couch as we entered. Even at that late hour Peter Kleiner wore the cheap suit and conservative necktie that stamped him as a clerk at a rubber shop or downtown office.

The sparsely furnished room was warm, the atmosphere chilly. Decent and godfearing is how its occupants would have described themselves, but they were not the kind you would reach out to when in need. Upstanding citizens, the kind who took "God helps those who help themselves" as their motto. Despite their Bible's admonition, they would be the first to cast stones. Their eyes held the same glint of self-righteousness found in portraits of a former

~~~~~  
Akronite, abolitionist John Brown.

The Kleiners answered Jack Eddy's questions without any display of emotion. I had to remind myself that it was the murder of their daughter; not some stranger, that was being discussed. Jack had introduced me by name, not occupation. Mrs. Kleiner showed no sign of remembering me as the man who had come for Sarah's photograph. For that I was grateful.

"We eat at six," Mr. Kleiner was saying when I put my thoughts aside and began listening. "Peter was off work with a summer head cold, and Sarah said she'd be home by supper-time. When she wasn't, we went ahead without her, but when she hadn't arrived at quarter to seven, we decided something might be wrong. Mrs. Kleiner called Sarah's friend Maxine Cahill, but she hadn't seen her. Then I rang the preacher. He went over to the church, then called back to say she wasn't there." He paused before adding resentfully, "The man didn't seem concerned about Sarah but was upset because the janitor had started the furnace but had forgotten to turn the damper down, so it was going full blast."

"He didn't open the furnace door?"

"He didn't mention it at the time, but later he said he hadn't.

Might have saved us a lot of time and trouble if he had."

Not to mention giving the police a jump on finding out what had happened. But saving time and trouble, was that the important thing to Kleiner?

Jack also had picked up on it. His voice was sharp-edged as he asked, "So what did you do next?"

"Walked over to the church myself. Couldn't get in, but thought maybe I'd see some sign of Sarah along the way. About the time I started out, Peter phoned his friend Bob Quill, thinking he might help look for her. He was out, but he got the message and came to the house soon after I got back. First thing he thought of was that fellow who'd been bothering Sarah, that Mike Savage."

"Bothering her? How?"

"Calling up here all the time. Going to places where he thought she might be, always pestering her to go out with him. Picture shows, dancing, roller skating, that sort of thing. Frivolities we don't hold with in this household."

I could tell Jack was itching to challenge him on that statement but managed to contain himself. It wasn't often that he allowed good sense to stand in the way of a barbed comment, so I was impressed by his restraint.

He turned to Peter. "Bob Quill, he's an old friend, is he?"

"We've known each other since grade school."

"What did you do after he mentioned this Savage?"

It took me a second or two to remember it was a name, not a description. It always had that effect on me.

Peter, whose round face, pug nose, and thick lips put me in mind of a frog, blinked his eyes rapidly. "We went looking for him."

"And?"

"We stopped by the place where he worked, but he wasn't there."

"And then?"

"He had a room up on Dayton Street near Jennings School. His landlady said she'd been out all day and hadn't seen him."

"So you didn't find him?"

"No."

"What next, then?" Jack's impatience with short answers was starting to show.

"Drove around looking in places where she might have been. Isaly's, places like that."

"What made you think she might be at Isaly's?"

"Maybe stopped for a Coke or ice cream, something like that."

"And stayed there for what . . . two hours or more?"

"We didn't know what else to do." Peter was starting to get his back up. "What would you have

done? Where would you have looked?"

Jack gave him a placating smile. "Probably the same spots you did. Did you go in your car?"

"In Bob's. I don't have one."

Jack looked back to Mr. Kleiner. "This Savage, where did it turn out he was that night?"

"Summit Beach Park. With a girl, naturally."

"And during the afternoon?"

"Working, he said. Pumps gas at a station on Tallmadge Avenue, or did at the time."

"That's only a few blocks from the church, isn't it?"

"It is, but the boss claimed Savage was there all afternoon. Well, except for a short time when he ran a customer's car back to him after a brake job."

Jack turned to Edina Kleiner. "Your husband mentioned Sarah's friend. Maxine Cahill, was it? She had other friends, didn't she?"

The woman's lips barely moved. "I'm sure you wouldn't know young women of Sarah's kind. She was very discriminating when it came to who she associated with."

With Herculean effort I suppressed the laughter fighting to burst forth. A beautiful put-down, one that wasn't lost on Jack Eddy. But what had we learned? Little if anything we hadn't known from reading the

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Times-Press file. Jack wound it up with a final pair of questions addressed to Kleiner:

"Do you think Pop Bannister is guilty?"

"Judge not, that ye be not judged."

"Do you think he should get the chair?"

"An eye for an eye, says the Lord."

On that happy note we took our leave. As we crossed the long North Hill Viaduct that took us downtown I said, "Admit it, Jack, that was a complete waste of time."

"Not at all, buddy. Now we know the kind of people we're dealing with first-hand."

"I'd hate to have to throw myself on the mercy of that bunch. Why are some religious people so self-righteous?"

"You don't have to be religious to be that way, friend. Granted, when people who believe their way is the way for everybody go overboard on religion, or anything else for that matter, the result isn't pretty. Just be thankful they're a minority. If the time ever comes when they aren't, I don't want to be around."

After talking to Plato Largis on another matter at the police station the next morning, I mentioned Pop Bannis-

ter's upcoming date with the chair. "You're convinced he's guilty, Plato? Beyond a shadow of a doubt?"

The portly detective fixed his penetrating dark eyes on me a moment, then gave a slight shrug. "I don't have to be. It wasn't my case, remember?"

"I know, but you must have an opinion."

He grinned and gave me a friendly poke in the stomach. "What're you trying to do, boy, get me to second-guess a colleague? I can see the banner headline now: DETECTIVE SAYS BANNISTER NOT GUILTY."

"Too many words, Plato. Wouldn't fit on one line."

"Get me to say I have doubts and that hard-nosed city editor of yours would turn the whole front page into a headline. But seriously, Bram, I wasn't close enough to the case to form an opinion. I mean one based on something more than what little talk I heard. I'll tell you one thing, but it's strictly off the record, okay?"

After a nod from me he said, "Nobody's said anything, understand, but there're a couple of boys around here would feel a whole lot better if they hadn't come down with the death penalty. From what I make of it, everything pointed to the janitor. But concrete evidence—I mean if you had said reasonable

doubt, then maybe, but when you start talking about not a shadow of a doubt, well . . .”

After deadline I gave Sue Baney a ring at her office and asked if she could meet me for lunch at Ptomaine Tommie's. She said she was busy and didn't know when she could get away. A little later as I walked north on Main Street I bumped into Helen Suder as she dashed out of Polsky's department store. Helen, who worked in the *Times-Press* society department, asked if I was on my way to lunch, which she called dinner, then fell into step beside me. I'm sure Tommie's wasn't on her list of select dining establishments, but she didn't complain when we went inside, just sniffed and murmured something about proper ventilation.

We finished our burgers and lingered a few minutes over coffee, Helen rattling on the entire time about some high society event she had attended the previous night. She was the kind who would be speechless if she couldn't use her hands. She also used them for touching to emphasize a point, laying them on your arm or hand or whatever part of your body was most convenient. She was leaning close, her hand on mine as she related some juicy tidbit about society people I'd never heard of, when

Sue Baney walked in, did a doubletake, then turned and stalked out again.

Wherever she went, we met her coming the other way as we walked back to the paper. She gave me an overly sweet smile, the kind dripping venom. “I saw you at the lunch counter and was going to come over but was afraid I might be interrupting something.”

Before I could think of a reply, she was gone, lost in the noon-time crowd. Helen looked over her shoulder and said, “Who was *that*?”

“Oh, just a girl I know.”

Helen's laugh was more of a shriek, the piercing kind of sound that can break crystal at twenty yards. “Just a girl you know? A girl you've been quite intimate with, I'm sure.”

In the 1930's saying someone had been intimate with a girl had an entirely different connotation than it did in later years. Not only was I being wrongly charged, I knew the story would be embellished and related to everyone at the *Times-Press*.

My day, a washout so far, didn't grow brighter when I slumped down at my desk to look over the first edition. A flood in California dominated page one. They had recovered a hundred and four bodies, ten of them sightseers who had drowned when a pedestrian



bridge collapsed at Long Beach. The governor had issued orders to shoot looters on sight. Cheery stuff, the kind that made me wonder why anyone chose to live in a state where earthquakes, floods, mudslides, and forest fires took turns in wreaking havoc.

The only good news was on the sports page. The Goodyear Wingfoots had won the National Basketball League championship for the second year in a row. Even that was tempered by my being reminded that East High's next tournament foe would be the tough Massillon Tigers. I sighed, pushed the paper aside, and turned to the window, wondering what else might happen to make my day a bit more sour. It began raining.

It was late evening before I saw Jack Eddy. He had called Mrs. Bauer to say he wouldn't make it for supper, remembering for once that failing to do so was at the top of her sin list. Busy on the Pop Bannister case, I had assumed, but when I asked about developments, he said, "Didn't have time for it today, buddy. Been in Kenmore since early morning helping Cal Andres finish up a different job."

Before I could say something I might have wished I hadn't, Kitty Bauer came flouncing down the stairs. The voluptuous

daughter of the household stopped in front of us, hands on hips, glaring at Jack. She held the pose a moment before saying, "I really appreciate being stood up, Mr. Eddy. You forgot we were going dancing, didn't you?"

Jack held out his hands, palms upward, the picture of innocence unless you knew this master of the con job. "Hey, kiddo, I called and told your mother I wouldn't be here for supper."

That made Kitty angrier yet. "You talked to my mother and that was good enough, was it? After this you can take *her* dancing."

She turned and went back up the stairs, pausing at the landing. "I guess I know where I stand with you, Jack Eddy."

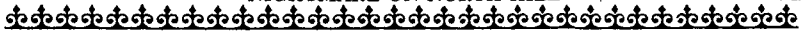
"Look, doll, I'm sorry. I'll make it up to—"

"Don't bother on my account!"

Jack turned to me with a bewildered look that quickly gave way to a grin. "Women! Who can understand 'em?"

"It's your own fault, Jack." I was thinking, though, of how I had dialed Sue Baney's number four times and heard four busy signals. She wasn't that much of a talker; the receiver was off the hook. I went to the phone and tried again. Busy signal.

The next afternoon Jack Eddy called to ask if I wanted to go



along when he talked to Mike Savage, Sarah Kleiner's unwelcome suitor. As soon as I was off the phone, Ben Goldsmith said, "That was Jack Eddy, wasn't it? What's he working on that involves you?"

How did the testy old city editor always know who I had on the line? With him hovering around, a man had no privacy at all. Ben's nose was even better than his ears: he could smell a story at five hundred yards. Reluctantly I said, "The Pop Bannister case."

It took a moment for the name to register; then the light dawned. "That janitor who killed the girl? Isn't his date with the chair coming up?"

"A week from Tuesday."

"What's new on it, Geary? How come you haven't kept me informed?"

"There's nothing new, Ben. Jack's just going over it again to satisfy Amos Dooby, Bannister's lawyer."

"Don't try to snow me, fella. Jack Eddy wouldn't put his pants on in the morning if there wasn't something in it for him. I want to be kept on top of this, understand? When can I expect something from you?"

For once I blew up under his relentless pressure. I slammed the dictionary I had been using down on the desk and headed for the door. "A week from Tues-

day," I called over my shoulder. "You'll get the story that Bannister was strapped in the chair and fried that morning."

Sitting back in Jack Eddy's stately Auburn sedan helped ease the tension, lowered my blood pressure. It took only a few minutes to reach North Hill, a predominantly Italian area severed from the rest of Akron by the wide valley of the Little Cuyahoga River. Odd, it seemed to me, that with so many first- and second-generation Italians living on the Hill not a single one was involved in the case. It didn't matter, of course, so I put the thought aside as Jack pulled into the filling station that was our destination.

"So I called her a few times, so what?" said Mike Savage. A smear of grease on one cheek of his narrow face highlighted his unclean appearance, went well with the dirt under his fingernails. Such things were part of his job, but Savage was the kind who could step out of a shower looking like he needed another. He wasn't happy about being questioned and kept glancing out at the pumps, hoping someone would pull in for gas.

Jack Eddy pressed on. "Why her? Sarah Kleiner wasn't exactly the belle of the Hill, was she?"

It wasn't a fair question. Pop-

ular girls wouldn't waste two seconds on the likes of Savage. Beneath the grime his face flushed as he tried to express the plight faced by all the Mike Savages of the world when they yearned for female companionship. "She wasn't too bad. I seen her when we was at North High, and, well, nobody ever asked her out. I thought maybe, well, you know . . ."

"You didn't get to first base, right?"

"Uh, no. She was always busy."

"But you took a chick to Summit Beach the night Sarah was killed, didn't you?"

The questions kept getting more embarrassing for the poor guy. "Well, I didn't exactly take her. She was there alone, and, well, you know, we got to talking. I mean we went on a couple of rides together, but then she said she had to go home." The story of his life in three sentences.

"That afternoon you delivered a car to a customer's house. Where exactly?"

"Up on Wall Street."

"Did the owner give you a lift back?"

Savage hesitated, more distressed by each succeeding question. I understood why the latest bothered him when he said, "Not that guy. It steams me the way he wants special treatment but

never hands out a tip and always expects you to walk back."

So there went his alibi. Depending upon the route taken, it meant he would have passed within a block or two of the church, might even have walked past the front door.

When we left the thoroughly miserable Savage, Jack wanted to see for himself. We drove to Wall Street, a workingman's residential street bearing no resemblance to the one of the same name several hundred miles to the east, then back past the church. Poor Mike, no alibi but an obvious motive. I didn't see him as a killer, though, at least not the cool variety who wouldn't have cracked during the first five minutes of interrogation by detectives. Those who had done the interrogating apparently felt the same way.

"Now what?" I said when we were back on Main Street.

"That's it for today, buddy. I've got another matter to attend to right now, so I'll drop you at the office."

He wasn't really trying, at least not that I could see. I kept my thoughts to myself, even when he pulled into an empty space across from the Metropolitan Building. Jack was dropping me off at *his* office, not mine.

I tagged along again the next

afternoon when he returned to North Hill to talk to Bob Quill, Peter Kleiner's old friend. Along the way I decided it was time to express my feelings. "You're damned casual about this case, Jack. Here it is Saturday, just a little more than a week left, and you aren't exactly knocking yourself out, are you?"

He laughed, aware that it would irritate me. "You don't know the half of it, buddy. I'll be out of town next week."

"Out of town? Where?"

"New York. The agency has a special training session for some of the top men around the country."

"And you're one of them, huh? I just hope Amos Dooby didn't tell Bannister you're supposed to be digging up new stuff. No matter what the man's done, it would be cruel to raise his hopes, then toy around with the case this way."

"I'm not toying around with it, friend. Cal Andres has a few days off, but starting Monday he'll be working on it."

"That's swell, isn't it? Another one starting from scratch and without a prayer. I told you the first day you should keep your nose out of it. What have you accomplished, Jack? Nothing, not a solitary thing."

He laughed again but didn't comment.

Bob Quill was a far cry from

what I expected. A real dude dressed to the nines in the middle of a Saturday afternoon. And he smelled of brilliantine or a potent shaving lotion, something dangerously close to perfume. In a hardworking town like Akron a man might smell of honest sweat, nothing more. What could Quill have in common with a stick-in-the-mud like Peter Kleiner? It was surprising that the elder Kleiner even allowed him in the house.

Our visit seemed almost a joke to him. He sat smiling, legs crossed, stroking his Gable-style mustache in the only comfortable chair in his Schiller Avenue apartment. A stone's throw away was the church where Sarah Kleiner had died. He laughed when Jack asked, "Did you ever date Sarah?"

"Me date Sarah? You must be kidding, fella. Obviously you didn't know her."

"That bad, huh?"

"Now, don't get me wrong. She wasn't a dog, nothing like that, but if you were looking for a girl to take out for a good time, her name wouldn't have leaped to mind."

Jack gave him a wicked grin. "Some men might see that as a challenge. Someone who thinks every woman should go into a swoon at the sight of him."

Someone like Bob Quill, that was Jack's message.

Quill didn't get it. Or maybe he did but didn't think it applied to him. His type wouldn't care for similar men, those who thought all females went weak in the knees in their presence. Anyone believing that of himself would look with scorn upon mere pretenders.

"Sarah didn't know anybody like that," he said. "Her old man would have chased them off with a club."

"But he thinks you're a swell guy, does he?"

"Why not?" said Quill, running a finger along the thin line of hair above his self-satisfied smirk. He was the sort of man you wanted to slug for no reason other than that he was there. "Me and Pete have been pals since grade school," he continued. "I'm like one of the family."

The weird thing was that it seemed to be true. Oil and water, who said they don't mix? Oily Bob Quill, the colorless Kleiners. Even Jack Eddy was thrown for a loss by that unlikely combination. He had only one more question: "So where were you the afternoon Sarah died?"

"Me?" That anyone should ask seemed to surprise Quill. I had read the answer on police reports long before he said, "Hoisting a few with the boys in a bar at Temple Square."

Jack had read the same reports. Still, he didn't press the issue even though none of "the boys" could say for sure that Quill was there after three o'clock.

We made one more stop, this one at the home of Maxine Cahill, Sarah Kleiner's lone friend. She was expecting us, had gotten all dolled up for the occasion. The effect wasn't what she had hoped for. She brought Mabel Klosterman at the boardinghouse to mind. A little too plump, a little too fleshy about the face, a little too much make-up ineptly applied, a dress that might have been worn successfully by some young women but was grotesque on her. Features and taste little different from those of attractive girls, yet that difference was monumental.

She had made coffee and brought each of us a cup after we were seated in the oversized living room of the house on Vesper Street. Aware of her uneasiness, Jack Eddy made an effort to be gentle in drawing her out on a subject that was obviously painful. In the first few minutes we learned that she was an only child and had a part-time job in a nearby grocery store. Throughout the Depression her mother had had steady work in an office at the courthouse. Her father, in common with so many Akronites, had recently found a job in

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a print shop after being out of work for several years.

Jack carefully led her to speak of Sarah Kleiner, avoiding the unpleasant topic that eventually would have to be raised. "So you and Sarah were friends from way back?"

"Since first grade at Findley School."

"Visited back and forth a lot, did you?"

Maxine shook her head. "Sarah always came over here. Her parents . . ." There was no need to finish the thought, we understood.

"Go out to places together?"

"Sometimes. We'd walk up to the Dayton Theater once in a while, but without her parents' knowing about it. They were funny about things like that. Sometimes we'd go somewhere for a Coke or to look at clothes, things like that."

"Either of you go out much with boys?"

The question made her blush. "No. Sarah never did and I, well, not too often."

She meant never. If offered the chance she would have jumped at it. Why couldn't the Maxine Cahills and the Mike Savages cross paths? They might have made each other happy.

"Mightn't Sarah have had a boyfriend without your knowing about it?"

"No, she would have told me." Tears suddenly welled up in Maxine's eyes. "I wish you'd stop asking me questions about Sarah. Can't you just let her rest in peace?"

"Tell me something, kid, would she rest easy if the wrong man gets the chair and her killer walks around free?"

Maxine dabbed at her cheeks with a frilly handkerchief. "Okay, you've made your point. But why did any of it have to happen? Why did she ever let a man . . ."

Only the ticking of a clock on the fireplace mantel disturbed the hush that had fallen over the room. Even Jack Eddy needed time to absorb Maxine's last statement. When he had he quietly said, "Let a man do what?"

"You know. Get her that way."

After another moment of shocked silence Jack said, "Are you saying Sarah was pregnant?"

You had to be watching closely to see the unhappy girl's brief nod. "Nobody else knew, I was the only one she told. Well, the only one except the man responsible. He wanted her to, uh, to get rid of it, even arranged with somebody to have it done, but Sarah refused."

"This man, who was he?"

"Sarah wouldn't tell me."

Whenever I asked, she'd shake her head and change the subject."

"Didn't she drop a hint? Come on, sweetie, think. It's important."

"I'm telling you she didn't. She wouldn't say a thing about that part of it."

The distraught girl seemed on the verge of hysteria. Jack went over and sat on the arm of her chair, patting her shoulder.

"Okay, don't get yourself all worked up. Look, you knew her better than anyone else. Don't you have some idea of your own? Sarah wasn't the kind of girl always out running around, so how many men could there have been in her life?"

"There weren't any that I knew about."

"Tell me this, then, was there someone else she might have confided in?"

"No. No one at all. I was her only close friend, the only one she would have talked to about a thing like that."

"How about her mother?"

"Never! She's the last person in the world Sarah would have told."

"And after what happened, you didn't tell anyone about it? Not her parents, or yours? Not the police?"

The idea horrified her. "No, and now I wish I hadn't told you. Why did you have to pressure

me like this? Even the police didn't do that."

"Maybe they should have. Look, kiddo, I hate having to upset you like this, but a man's life is at stake. You wouldn't want it on your conscience that you might have done something to save him but didn't. And think about this, if someone else killed her, he just might kill again. Then how would you feel? You did the right thing, so quit feeling guilty."

There was nothing more to be gained, so we left a few minutes later. Jack had managed to soothe the unfortunate girl, make her feel better about what she saw as the betrayal of a confidence. Now I was the one who felt low.

Nice girls like Maxine Cahill, why were they so often dealt a bum hand? And her friend Sarah, what kind of a hand had she been given to play? A normal girl raised to believe that anything enjoyable had to be evil, how could that idea make sense to anyone?

Jack drummed his fingers against the steering wheel, lost in thought as we descended the steep incline on Howard Street. The downtown buildings towered over us in the distance. Just before bottoming out at the bridge over the Little Cuyahoga he glanced at me and said, "Tell me something, buddy. Why

would Sarah confide in the only real friend she had, the one person she was able to talk to about it, but hold back on naming the man involved?"

"Too embarrassing, I guess."

"Come on, ace, use your head for a change. For a shy, introverted girl like Sarah wouldn't the most embarrassing thing be confessing she was pregnant? Wouldn't naming the man be the easiest part?"

"Look, Jack, how would I know how a girl would feel about something like that?"

"You've got an imagination, don't you? The way I see it, it has to be someone we know. If it was Bob Quill or Mike Savage, I don't think Sarah would have had any problem telling Maxine. The same applies to the minister or the choir director. I don't think she'd have hesitated a minute."

"So who does that leave? You're not suggesting—"

"Damn right I'm suggesting it wasn't the usual case of a boy and girl going too far, then having to face the consequences. It was something worse than that for Sarah."

"How about this, Jack. Savage, or someone like him, is the kind a lot of girls find repugnant. Admitting to a friend that you'd let someone like that . . . well, you know what I mean."

"It's a legitimate point. But

there's no reason to believe Sarah Kleiner had anything more to do with Savage than turn him down on the telephone or at some soda fountain. Even then I think she would have come out with it, making it sound like she was unwilling but he managed to have his way. No, this was something far more embarrassing."

"Do you realize what you're saying, Jack? By eliminating everyone else you've narrowed the possibilities down to her own brother or father. Surely you can't—"

He cut me off with a loud snap of his fingers. "No, you're wrong. Damn, the answer's so obvious, why didn't I tumble to it right off the bat?"

"Tumble to what?"

"Give me time, friend. I just thought of an angle I want to check out, that's all."

"Yeah, sure. Quit playing cute and tell me what it is."

"I told you to hold your horses."

"Come off it, Jack. You won't tell me about this brainstorm because you're afraid of being wrong. Admit it, you're afraid of being embarrassed."

He laughed and gave me another of his one-knuckle punches on the arm. "When in hell did you get your degree in psychiatry? Me embarrassed, that's a good one."



But it was the truth. He knew it and he knew that I knew it. Jack Eddy could handle just about anything that came his way, but he couldn't handle being wrong, not if someone else knew about it.

We finished the ride in silence. This time he dropped me off at the lot where I had parked my car rather than making me walk the better part of a mile. I had one foot on the running board when he said, "By the way, buddy, I want you to drive me to Cleveland tomorrow. I'm catching the Twentieth Century Limited."

Leave it to Jack Eddy to pass up all the trains heading east from Akron and pick one that went through Cleveland. And to take it for granted that I had nothing better to do than act as his chauffeur.

**A**rtie Bauer and I were back at Goodyear Gym that evening cheering wildly as the East Orientals battled Massillon for a berth in the following week's district tournament. East jumped out to a lead, and I watched fascinated as Paul Brown, the Massillon coach, appeared to be ignoring the action on the floor. At heart Brown was a football coach, of course. In those Depression years, few schools could afford more than

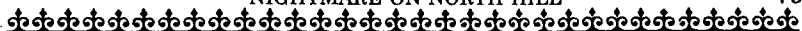
one coach, so for Brown and others it was an all-sport job.

Brown was rewriting the book on coaching football. The things he originated would in later years be routine practice at every level of the game. In the 1930's his Massillon Tigers were playing the best teams from as far away as Nebraska and Massachusetts, whipping them all by astronomical scores. Even so, no one dreamed that someday he would be the founder of two professional teams, dress them both in Massillon orange, and lend his name to the one representing Cleveland.

Now with Massillon trailing, the slim man dressed in brown ran a hand over his thinning hair, leaned back, and casually began filing his fingernails. The message of his discontent came across to his players more forcibly than any amount of shouting or wild antics. The Tigers fought desperately, but to no avail. East won 38-32; Artie and I headed home hoarse but happy.

I dialed Sue Baney's number to tell her the news and see if she wanted to go somewhere for a soda or sandwich. Her line was busy.

The following days passed in dreary fashion. Not just because Jack Eddy was off living it up in New York, or because



Sue Baney was in a snit over a perfectly innocent occurrence. It just seemed that the whole world had turned sour. But damn Jack Eddy for making me believe Pop Bannister might be innocent, then going merrily on his way while I was left to stew over the rapidly approaching date of execution.

After supper I took long, lonely walks past rubber factories—Goodyear, Mohawk, General—all sharing the same air of desolation in the chill March darkness. I'd stop occasionally in some dim bar where rubberworkers drank beside those without jobs, men sitting quietly nursing their cheap beers to make them last as long as possible. Better that than go home and face the reproachful looks of wives who couldn't conceal their despair.

The men knew they were blameless, yet they felt the burden of responsibility. For some that burden induced guilt, and the guilt led to anger. The anger spread to those still working when Goodrich threatened to take five thousand jobs out of Akron unless the employees agreed to a substantial cut in wages already too low for anything more than survival. If that wasn't enough to have Akronites seething, Goodyear was ignoring seniority in announcing new layoffs.

So I was far from being alone in finding little joy. The Industrial Valley wasn't the place to look for it as winter grudgingly gave way to spring in 1938.

I spent part of one evening at home but couldn't get interested in the radio show the others were enjoying. Bus Bauer had his ear glued to the big Grunow console, afraid of missing a single word as The Shadow solved the case of the White Legion. Even straitlaced Miss Ferrabee had dropped her knitting, totally absorbed by the story. Old Mr. Reimer, the retired druggist, wasn't concentrating on the book in his hands, while Mabel Klosterman was wide-eyed and beginning to perspire.

So why wasn't I caught up in the emoting of Orson Welles and Agnes Moorehead? My thoughts kept wandering without going anywhere in particular. The show was nearly over and all I could really recall were the commercials for Blue Coal. Did Pennsylvania anthracite really burn with a blue flame? No one I knew could afford to use it. And why didn't The Shadow pay a visit to Akron? He knew the evil that lurks in the hearts of men, but in whose heart would he find it?

Orson Welles was thanking the audience for tuning in for the final show of the season when I walked out of the room,

picked up the phone in the hallway, and once again dialed Sue Baney's number. I felt like a fool persisting that way, consoled only by the fact that no one else, Sue included, knew I was doing so.

Not getting a busy signal was so surprising that I was momentarily at a loss for words when Sue answered on the second ring. "Uh, Sue," I finally stammered, "it's Bram. Bram Geary."

"You needn't elaborate, you're the only Bram I'm acquainted with. Anyway, I recognized your voice. What do you want?"

"Uh, nothing in particular. Just wondered how you were. Want to go out for a soda or something?"

"I have company, Bram. What's the problem, is your girlfriend busy this evening? Or is there more than one, do I need to be more specific?"

"Now look, Sue, that wasn't my girlfriend. You know that as well as I do. And who's there with you, a man or woman?"

"I hardly think that's any of your concern. I have to go now."

"Well then, how about—" I was talking to myself, she had hung up. I looked around to see if anyone was within hearing distance. No one was, but even so I said goodbye before replacing the receiver. Having a conversation end so abruptly was embarrassing even when no one

but yourself was there to know about it.

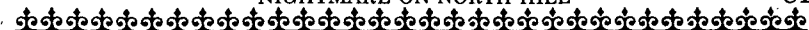
Jack Eddy arrived home on Friday evening while Artie and I were out watching East beat Scienceville. I had never heard of the place, and from what little I could discover, Scienceville was just a neighborhood on the north side of Youngstown. Now the Orientals were just a game away from a trip to the sixteen-team state finals.

Jack had dropped off his suitcase, then left again for his office. I was fast asleep before he returned, so I never did hear how he got back from Cleveland, or if he had come home on one of the trains passing through Akron.

**I**t was the Depression, I believe, that kept most of us from paying real attention to what was happening in the rest of the world. When the wolf is at your door, or skulking somewhere just down the street, you don't worry about the tiger on the prowl far beyond an ocean.

There was one time-honored exception. The starving children of India had a way of turning up in conversation whenever Artie Bauer or some other mother's child complained about having to eat succotash or dandelion greens for supper.

All that changed on Saturday



morning. The first stories were coming over the wire when I walked into the newsroom a few minutes before seven. The German army had marched into Austria, Hitler was on the move. Only the most naive could believe this wasn't just the first step, that more wouldn't quickly follow. The Beast of Berlin had started down the road to war, a war that eventually would involve us all.

A vision of myself in uniform exchanging fire with goose-stepping stormtroopers hit me. I shook it off, only to have it return periodically throughout the day. The resulting glumness persisted, even when Artie and I went back to Goodyear Gym that evening to see East beat Euclid Shore. The Orientals had won a district championship and a trip to the state finals in Columbus. I should have been celebrating, not shuffling around in a blue funk.

I spent Sunday morning poring over the newspapers, looking up now and then as Mr. Reimer clucked his tongue while reading of Hitler's easy conquest of his native land. Shortly before noon I dialed Sue Baney's number. There was no answer. After going upstairs and making my bed I prowled around the boardinghouse, restless and undecided about going out somewhere

for a sandwich. I hated quiet Sundays.

It was a phone call from Jack Eddy that settled my plans for the afternoon. "Better get off your duff, buddy, and come down to the agency," he said. I asked why. "Caleb Cahill, Maxine's old man, is coming in at one o'clock."

"What for?"

"Look, friend, leave the questions to me. Just be here."

A direct order no less, and the prospect of obeying it was underwhelming. Nothing better came to mind, though, so I drove downtown, stopping along the way for a quick sandwich at a little joint where Buchtel Avenue crossed Market Street at an angle. The counterman was frying a hamburger for the lone customer, so I ordered the same. While sipping coffee I watched a roach crawl out from a crack near the grill, then up onto the cook's hot spatula. At that moment the man picked it up without looking, slipped it under the hamburger and flipped the meat onto a waiting bun, then slid the plate down the counter to the unsuspecting customer.

I opened my mouth to say something, but what? Pardon me, sir, there's a roach in your sandwich. The man took a bite. Now it was too late. I leaned back and watched him eat with



gusto but kept one eye on that spatula.

Aside from a few early arrivals for the movie at the Keith-Albee Palace, Main Street was as deserted as usual on a Sunday afternoon. I parked in front of the Metropolitan Building, rode the elevator to the fifth floor, walked into the Wellington Agency a few minutes before one. Cliff Austin was the operative pulling floor duty. I was passing the time of day with him when a man hesitantly opened the door, a cadaverous looking fellow of about forty-five with smudged wire-rimmed glasses and thinning red hair that stood out in little tufts when he took off his sweat-stained fedora.

Jack Eddy must have been listening. Before anyone could say a word, he came down the hall from his private office and greeted the man with an outstretched hand. "Mr. Cahill? Come on back." Taking Cahill's arm, he guided him along the hallway. Over his shoulder he called, "You too, Bram."

Jack helped Cahill out of his overcoat, hung it on a peg, seated the man in a chair near his cluttered desk. I went to another beside a low table in a dark corner. I knew Jack Eddy, knew such exaggerated politeness wasn't like him. Was the man being softened up for the kill?

A few boring moments passed with Jack telling about our talk with Maxine, her surprising revelation concerning Sarah Kleiner. I perked up a little when he finally got to the point. "The thing is, Mr. Cahill, Sarah wouldn't name the man responsible. I thought maybe you could help us with that."

"I don't see how." They were the first words spoken by Cahill since he'd arrived. He had been tense up to then; Jack's friendly approach was helping him relax.

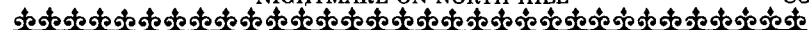
"The problem, as I'm sure you know, is that Sarah had limited contact with men. We've eliminated most of them: Reverend Yarger, the choir director, Bob Quill, a would-be suitor named Mike Savage."

"What's the point in this? That janitor, Bannister, killed Sarah. Why are you dragging it up again?"

"We don't think Pop Bannister is guilty, Mr. Cahill. In fact we're sure of it. So who does that leave? Sarah's father and her brother." Jack leaned far back in his chair, locking his hands behind his head and smiling like that wolf lurking down the street. "And you, of course."

"Me?" Cahill stiffened, taken aback.

Jack went on being uncharacteristically polite. "You would



have had the opportunity, wouldn't you? Maxine said Sarah often came over while she was out and waited for her. Maxine was never comfortable at the Kleiners', which is understandable, so they always got together at your place."

"Yes, she told me about the atmosphere at Sarah's home." He gave a quick, high-pitched laugh, trying to appear at ease, not quite succeeding. "But to even think that I . . . well, the idea's preposterous."

"Is it really, Mr. Cahill? Sarah was an attractive girl. A little repressed and shy but still appealing. Men noticed her, which was natural. With you being out of a job and Mrs. Cahill working all day at the courthouse, it must have been a temptation being alone with Sarah that way."

"It didn't happen often. I wasn't always home, you know. For you to think that I would have made advances—"

Jack suddenly leaned forward, his cordiality vanishing in a flash. "We don't *think* it, Cahill, we *know*. It wasn't difficult, was it? A girl like Sarah, not knowing much about men yet having normal curiosity and desires. An easy mark, wasn't she?"

"I don't—"

"Just be quiet and listen. We know exactly what happened. It started tentatively, a little

seemingly harmless banter that soon led to bigger things. Sarah began coming over when she knew Maxine wouldn't be there and the two of you had all the time in the world. But you were stupid about it, didn't take the precautions you should have. You were frantic when you learned she was pregnant. So was Sarah. She had to confide in someone, so she told her only real friend, Maxine, but she couldn't bring herself to tell her it was her own father who was responsible.

"So you lined up some quack to perform a back alley abortion, but Sarah either was afraid or wouldn't go along with the idea because of her religious beliefs. Time was running out, and you became more and more desperate. She wouldn't come to the house any more unless she was certain Maxine was home. You wouldn't have dared go to her house, so you went to the church when you knew she'd be there. You were lucky, or maybe unlucky, because no one else was around. Sarah wouldn't listen, though, still refused to go along with your plans. You got more and more worked up, and suddenly things got out of control. You didn't plan to kill her, it just happened. Then you thought you could cover it up, figured you had a way to keep anyone from knowing what became of



her. In your state of mind you forgot one thing, you forgot that no one fires up a furnace in late June."

Cahill was on his feet, pale and shaky but trying to bluff his way through. "This is unbelievable. I don't have to stay here and listen to this nonsense."

"That's right, you don't." Jack reached for the telephone, resting his hand on the receiver without picking it up. "But maybe you should sit down and listen a minute before I turn it over to the cops."

Cahill slumped down on the chair, frightened by the thought of facing the police. Jack let him stew a moment before saying, "Have you ever been in the back room at a police station, Cahill? And do you know what it means to go around the horn?"

"Sailing around the tip of South America. Or maybe it's Africa, I can't remember."

"To some people, yes. In this part of the country it means taking a trip to Cleveland. Do you know how many precinct houses they have up there? You start at the station downtown. They blindfold you and take you to one of the precincts by car. The boys there work you over, work you over good. Then they take you to another precinct and the same thing happens. On and on that way, that's how it goes. When you get back

downtown, you don't know where you've been, and you didn't see a single face. In other words, it never happened, so there's no use complaining to anyone."

Cahill was badly shaken. Beads of sweat that earlier had formed on his forehead were now streaming down his face.

Jack lit a cigarette, exhaled a cloud of smoke, then handed the pack of Camels to Cahill. "One other thing. That's the way it works with thieves and robbers, those who won't talk. What do you think they'd do with somebody who murdered a young girl and stuffed her body in a furnace and then was going to let an innocent man fry?"

The prospect was too much for Cahill. In a shaky voice he said, "My God, it was an accident. It was the last thing in the world . . . And don't you think it's been driving me crazy about Bannister, but what could I do? It's been a nightmare for me, can't you see that?"

Jack eyed him with contempt. "Sure, I see. I'm not so sure you do, though. You say it's been a nightmare for you, but what about the Kleiners, what about Pop Bannister?" Jack picked up the phone. "And how about Maxine and your wife? Do you think that from now on it's going to be happy dreams for them?"



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In retrospect I decided Jack had been right. It should have become obvious while we were talking to Maxine. He woke up to it quickly, and that, I suppose, is why he was a detective and I just stood back and observed. It occurred to me, too, that he had deliberately waited until the last minute in order to achieve the maximum dramatic effect.

The official word reached Columbus Monday morning, twenty-one hours before Pop Bannister was slated to take his last short walk. Akronites heard the news Sunday night, at least those who bought the Extra published by the *Times-Press*. It was big news, but I hadn't expected an extra. Perhaps I should have; it was the only way to beat the Monday editions of the *Beacon Journal* and *Plain Dealer*.

I doubt if anyone else even noticed the point that gave me the most satisfaction. My story had pushed Hitler out of the headlines and down below the fold on page one. His first setback, even if he didn't know about it.

For a few hours the excitement banished the blues that had been nagging me, then they came creeping back. Was it the fault of the man in Berlin, the apprehension over what lay ahead, or was it the unavailability of Sue Baney? I wasn't cer-

tain, but I knew that life had lost its zest.

Even going to Columbus to see East play Hamilton in the state finals wasn't the fun it should have been. Sunday was to have been my day off, so Ben Goldsmith agreed to give me Thursday as compensatory time. Artie Bauer wasn't as fortunate. All his begging and pleading didn't convince Mrs. Bauer that he should be allowed to skip school and go with me. He didn't miss much; in a midafternoon game the Hamilton Big Blue eliminated the Orientals, 17-12.

I arrived back home just too late for supper. Before going out somewhere for a bite I dialed Sue Baney's number on impulse, and this time she answered. She had already eaten but agreed somewhat reluctantly to have a cup of coffee at the New Era Cafe just down the street from her apartment. It didn't go well, was about as enjoyable as watching East get sidelined in the tournament.

A few months later Caleb Cahill was found guilty. He was handed a life sentence rather than given the chair. The narrow escape of Pop Bannister seemed to scare Akron judges and juries off death sentences for a while. Soon after the trial Maxine and her mother left town.

Pop Bannister never returned to Akron. His friend Amos Dooby sold the house on Carpenter Street for him, then shipped his possessions to an address in Piqua, where for reasons unknown Pop had decided to settle. All I knew about Piqua was that it was in the western part of the state and was the hometown of the Mills Brothers, the popular singing group. I wasn't even sure how to pronounce its name.

Bannister was the big winner in it all, of course. Jack Eddy fared well, too, the nationwide publicity enabling him to take a giant step on his climb toward the top. Now that things had quieted down, he and Kitty had made up and were out dancing

their shoes off several nights a week.

Scoring a big scoop over the competition meant I was another in the winner's circle. So why wasn't I happy?

Ben Goldsmith may have provided the answer when he joined me one afternoon while I was sitting alone at the bar in Stone's Grill on Main Street. "Been down in the dumps lately, haven't you, Geary?" he said. "I guess."

"Guess, my foot. You know what your trouble is, don't you?"

When I shook my head, he said, "You've grown up, kid. You've been in this game long enough to come down with the old newspaperman's affliction. You've learned about people."

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the April issue.

Some analysts blamed it on economic mismanagement and runaway inflation, others on decadent leadership, and still others on the final rebellion of the downtrodden masses. It really didn't matter what the cause. The once-great nation of Yanaska was no more, its power destroyed forever. The lucky government officials fled into exile; the unlucky were executed by mobs. Law and order no longer existed. Bandits and starving peasants roamed the countryside.

Out of the bloodshed and chaos seven new countries emerged from the old Yanaska, each formed around common ethnic bonds. In each of these upstart countries an enterprising strong man arose from among the lower classes and proclaimed himself king.

In those troubled and unstable times each king tried to consolidate his power and territory at the expense of his neighbors. After a series of "border incidents" (actually, armed invasions), the United Nations urged the kings to meet at a conference and try to settle their disputes peaceably. Finally even King Setzoff agreed.

Suspicion was rife, and old resentments flared as the day of the scheduled peace conference approached. United Nations observers convinced them that their safety would be assured if each king and his wife were screened by a metal detector. As a further safeguard, each king would be handed a magnetic card that would be activated upon his entering the conference room and deactivated upon his leaving it.

The seven kings settled on a luncheon conference; the first name of one of them was Karl. The kings and queens were an earthy, unsophisticated lot, having come from the peasantry; one king had formerly been a barber.

On the agreed day each king and his queen came prepared to argue for their particular cause. The first couple entered the room at precisely noon; others arrived at five-minute intervals. The last couple came at twelve thirty, and the room was sealed. A United

Nations guard was posted just outside the door. More than three hours later, the royal couples began leaving. Some were smiling as they emerged—the conference seemed to have gone well.

Six couples had already departed for their hotels. What could be keeping that last couple in there by themselves, the guard wondered. Finally he decided to investigate.

"Oh my God!" he exclaimed. "The king and queen of Nulandia have been murdered!"

Of that there could be no question. An ebony knife had been buried to the hilt in each of the royal chests. Blood seeped onto the polished floor of the conference room. The guard's cries brought a score of UN personnel rushing to the scene. Medics were summoned immediately. After a preliminary examination of the still-warm bodies, they concluded that death had been instantaneous, occurring at almost exactly four o'clock that afternoon.

Colonel Bart Smart took charge. His previous tour with the FBI had trained him to handle such situations. Besides, he spoke fluent Yanaskish, the common language of old Yanaska. "Quick," he commanded the military police, "bring the kings and queens from their hotels. Be sure they bring those cards showing the time they spent in that room."

When all had assembled, Colonel Smart addressed them. "The guard on duty reports that you couples entered the murder room at five-minute intervals starting at noon. I'd like for you to clarify the sequence in which you entered. But first, if I may, let me collect those special cards that were issued to you." There was some grumbling, but all complied. "Now we'll take down your statements," declared Colonel Smart.

(1) Isaac went first. "King Oldoff came just after me, and the former carpenter was next. We are married to queens Brenda, Diana, and Flora. I wasn't formerly a gardener." (Colonel Smart noted that Isaac's card showed that he'd spent ten minutes less in the conference room than had Norman.)

(2) The king of Haglandia was next. "The next couple after me was King Taxoff and his queen. They were followed next by Queen Gilda and her husband. We three men are named James, Larry, and Norman." (The colonel noted that King Taxoff had been in the conference room exactly three hours and fifty minutes.)

(3) Queen Angela spoke. "Just after my husband and I came in, King Ranoff entered. He was followed by the king of Inlandia. They

were formerly a dairyman, a farmer, and a handyman." She said it with a great show of pride in their humble backgrounds. (According to his card, the king of Inlandia was in the conference room exactly three hours and forty minutes.)

(4) The former gardener said, "Harry came in just after me; then came Queen Cindy and her husband. We three men are the kings of Jamlandia, Laxlandia, and Mylandia." (The former gardener, the colonel noted, spent exactly the same amount of time in the conference room as did the former farmer.)

(5) Queen Elvira stood and declared, "In succession after me the following three couples entered the room: the king and queen of Kinlandia, Larry and his queen, and the former handyman and his wife." (Elvira and her mate, as shown on the cards, spent exactly five minutes more in the room than did Queen Angela and her husband.)

(6) Mark said, "I was not the last one to enter that room. Queen Diana was already present when I came."

(7) King Popoff stated, "I was not the first into the room. Queen Brenda came later than I, and the couple from Laxlandia came still later, and they were not the last." (Card records showed that the king of Laxlandia spent the same length of time in the conference room as did the king of Mylandia.)

(8) King Quidoff said, "The former pedlar came after me, but not immediately after." (The former pedlar was in the room for twenty minutes less than the former handyman.)

(9) Queen Elvira declared, "I'm not married to either Norman or the former dairyman."

(10) King Uboff said, "I came in just before the king of Mylandia."

Colonel Bart Smart held up his hand. "That's quite enough information, thank you. It's obvious that five couples had already left the conference room when the murders took place. The guilty couple can only be King _____ and Queen _____ of _____." He called for the UN military police to take the pair into custody.

Which royal couple was stabbed? Who did it?

See page 155 for the solution to the February puzzle.

FICTION

HAVE I GOT A SYSTEM FOR YOU

Arthur Zirul



A week ago I was broke, so broke I'd even used up my mad money, which every gambler is supposed to keep in reserve until his dying day. I'd come down to laying penny-ante bets on the street corner, and thinking that living in a Brooklyn subway tunnel wouldn't be so bad, when Slick Charlie comes up to me and says, "Bobby Boy, have I got a system for you."

"I already got a system," I says. "I lose everything on the first three races, and then I go home."

"No, for serious, Bobby. I guarantee this system will make you as rich as Crisco before you can wink an eye."

Charlie has been known to flim a few flams in his time, so I asks, "If it's such a good system, why you giving it to me?"

"Who said anything about giving?" Charlie says, coming so close I could smell his lunch, which was pepperoni pizza. "I'm selling the system to friends only."

"Forget it, Charlie," I says. "I'm tapped out. I couldn't buy a ticket to a free lunch."

"Your word is good enough for me," he says. "All you got to raise is the green for a bet, and you give me twenty percent of what you win, simple as pie."

"Gee, Charlie," I says, "I do believe you've invented touting.

How long has that been around, since Cleopatra?" I make a move to go about my business, but Charlie puts a hand on my shoulder.

"I also guarantee your bet," he says. "If you lose, I give you your money back."

Now he's got my attention. I ponder his offer a minute and says, "Well, as long as you're being so generous, Charlie, why don't you just give me the money now and save yourself a trip later?"

Charlie gets a big grin on his face. "Bobby, Bobby, Bobby," he says like he was my uncle, "I do not give such a gift to any clown who cries in my beer. First you got to show me some green up front. I do not deal with total losers." I nod like I agree with him; listening don't cost nothing.

"There's a filly running at Aqueduct name of Sweet One," he says. "Bet a hundred on her nose. You should get five for two with any bookie in town. You win, you still got your bet money and you're two hundred ahead—that is, after you pay me my twenty percent. You lose and I give you your hundred back. Now, how can you beat a deal like that?"

I ponder further on Charlie's proposal and have to admit there really is no way to beat a deal like that. Common sense

should have told me there was something not kosher going on here, but horseplayers are short on such sense as any social worker will tell you. I am hooked like a fish out of water. All I need is a Ben Franklin to get in on Charlie's deal.

That's where Max comes in. Max is not only a bookie, he's also a loanshark. One-stop shopping, so to speak. You don't run a tab with Max. You borrow money to bet, and you pay interest on it. It's a trick Max picked up from the credit card companies. You borrow a hundred from Max, and you pay back a hundred and twenty-five; it don't matter if you win or lose. If you care to extend your loan, the next day costs a hundred and fifty, and the day after that it's one seventy-five, and so on. If you are still not paid up in five days, Max sends his enforcer, Two-ton, after you. As you can see, Max can't lose, but you can—an arm, a leg, whatever Two-ton fancies.

I borrow the money from Max and lay the bet with him. Sure enough, Sweet One wins. I pay back Max, and when Charlie seeks me out, I give him his twenty percent. Charlie then smiles real nice and gives me another tip, this time on a pacer running at Freehold paying four to one. I'd already spent my winnings on rent, which was three

weeks behind, so I borrow two hundred from Max, and bless my soul, I win eight hundred. Max gets back his two hundred in betting money plus fifty in interest, Charlie gets a hundred and sixty for his twenty percent, and I end up with five hundred and ninety nice green dollars. Not bad, not bad at all. I think that somehow I'm being rewarded for all the good deeds I done since I was twelve.

I counted my chickens before they were in my basket. I lose the third bet. A longshot on a mudder who is running on a dry track at Aqueduct. It costs me five hundred bucks, and I'm almost back to square one. I'm also looking for Charlie because now I'm thinking this is where Charlie stiffes me by not giving me my bet money back. I find Charlie at his place of business, a back booth at Happy Joe's bar on Bleeker Street.

Charlie smiles when I tell him my woes. Before I can woe another woe, he brings out his wad and gives me the money I lost, in crisp new bills. On top of that he tells me I've entered a new level of playing. He won't guarantee my bets no more; instead he will advance me all the money for the bets he wants me to make, only now I got to give him back eighty percent of what I win. Before I have time to ponder on *this* development, he

gives me five brand-new Ben Franklins and a tip on a pony named Big Boy who is running in the fifth at Aqueduct.

I wasn't born yesterday on the back of a turnip truck. Charlie is conning me into laying his bets for him. Why? Charlie knows more bookies than the police commissioner. I figure he's passing funny money and I'm the yokum who's going to get caught in the middle. I take the bills to a local bank and try to act like a tourist from Topeka.

"I think some bad man gave me counterfeit money at the doughnut shop," I says to the shirt-and-tie behind the desk. "Could you check this for me, please?" I hand him one of Charlie's Franklins.

He looks it over with a magnifying glass and says, "This bill is of the new series. The Franklin watermark and the security threads are in place, and there's all those teeny-tiny letters on Ben Franklin's lapel that say 'The United States of America' sharp and clear. This is pure U.S. currency, sir. Use it in good health." Or words to that effect.

Well, I make the bet on Big Boy's nose and I win four for two, I give Charlie his eighty percent and his bet money back, and I get to keep two hundred, which is a good thing as I am running out of eating money. Charlie then hands me ten

Franklins, a whole grand, and a tip on a mare name of Monkey Doll running in the third at the Meadowlands.

There is something definitely funny going on here. The bills he gives me this time are not new. I figure Charlie is handling hot money. The proceeds from a bank robbery or a kidnapping, no doubt. I pull the same dumb tourist routine at the Federal Reserve bank in the financial district. They got computers there for checking hot serial numbers all the way back to Al Capone. The bills come away clean. The bank lady even gives me a brochure on why I should buy savings bonds.

Monkey Doll wins and, at five to one, pays off real nice. I now got five grand. I give Charlie four grand plus his betting stake, and that leaves me my cut, a thousand lovely dollars—which I put real quick in my shirt pocket for mad money. I should be feeling great, but a funny thing is happening: I'm feeling cheated. Why should Charlie get all the gravy? I have as much right to his crooked money as he does, don't I? I want a bigger cut. You see what greed and the gambling life can do to you?

When Charlie hands me another grand and a tip on a horse named Clover Leaf running in Gulfstream Park in Florida, I

figure I'll make a killing using somebody else's money. I go to see Max. Max will book any race anywhere. He don't play favorites, and he pays off at track odds. I bet the grand Charlie gave me and borrow another grand from Max, which Max lends me because I am now on his preferred customer list, not having stiffed him recently. I sit down in Max's betting parlor among his regulars and watch the race on his simulcast link. Max is up on the latest technology. Unfortunately, that don't help Clover Leaf none. He comes in tenth in a nine horse race.

I don't wait to hear from Max, as I don't like loud noises. I beat it out of his place, and I run over to Happy Joe's bar. I am hoping that Charlie's next bet will let me square things with Max.

Charlie gives me a big hello when I walk in his door and congratulates me, saying I have reached yet another plateau. I've gone from the twenty percent class to the ten percent class. At first I do not consider this an upward move until Charlie tells me I am to bet ten grand on a race in Oceanside Park. Oceanside is a new track outside Atlantic City that was built to soak up some of the boardwalk's action. The bad news is, I can't lay the bet with Max; I have to do it at the track. What's bad about news like that

is that Max does not like having his money taken out of his sight, especially when I now owe him a grand plus interest. But when Charlie hands me the ten grand in cash, I suddenly know how I can deal with Max.

I'm sure that this time I'm on to Charlie's scam: he's fixing races for the boys in a certain well-known crowd, and he's using me as his front man. That is okay with me because I figure that this ten grand bet is going for a big payoff, which is destined to make a lot of said crowd members very happy. If I work it right, it will make me and Max very happy, too.

I rush over to Max's place and show him the cash Charlie gave me. Max is all set to extract his grand plus interest when I tell him my tale and convince him the fix is in. My tag line is if he loans me ten more grand I'll split the take with him and he still gets his interest. My tale convinces Max and he goes for the deal, but not before commenting on how bored Two-ton is getting, not having dismembered anyone lately. I leave Max's place with twenty grand in my pockets and a song in my heart.

I catch a bus out of the Port Authority Terminal on Eighth Avenue and get to the track in South Jersey an hour before race time. Charlie got me a pass

to a private lounge where high-rollers can place big bets. I had no idea Charlie mixed in such fancy company. Those crowd members live well. The lounge has a great view of the track plus a private betting window for your convenience. It's also got personal service in the way of drinks and snacks served by very presentable young ladies who wear short skirts and big smiles. I follow Charlie's instructions, which is to wait until a minute before race time before I place my bet. All the money is to go on the nose of Star Son in the second race.

Star Son is an up-and-comer who, as I learn from conversations in the lounge, is so hot I wonder why they would have to fix the race. But mine is not to reason why; I place the bet as ordered, and my action seems to raise a few eyebrows. Twenty grand is a considerable bet at a track window, even at a high-rollers' window, especially when one considers the tax forms that come along with the winnings. But like I said, mine is not to reason why.

As I'm leaving the window, I notice the infield toteboard start to flick through some changes. The board's registering the odds on the upcoming race, and I see that, because of the considerable bet I have just made, Star Son has dropped from three to one to

one for five—which means the bettors on Star Son now have to give considerable odds to the track. A chill grips my heart.

I finally know what funny business Charlie is in. He's working for that well-known crowd all right, but he isn't fixing any races. Charlie is shaving track odds, and at ten grand a pop—which I have raised to twenty grand—it's turned into a really big hit.

It is well known to sports lovers that a large piece of the horse action in this country is handled by bookies who offer tax-free investments which they pay off at track odds. If too many bets are put down on a favorite horse, said bookies can save a lot of green by shaving the odds on that horse at the track. It don't take that much green, either. The average pari-mutuel win pool on a race runs between one and two hundred grand, so twenty grand can really take down the odds—as long as the bet is made before all the other sportsmen at the track have time to even things up.

I suddenly realize that what Charlie's really been doing all this time is setting me up as a patsy for this one scam. Track bosses do not like odds shaving. They got every known odds shaver spotted, and they exert great effort to change their ways, including arm-twisting,

bruising, and bouncing down the grandstand steps. I know now that it doesn't matter if Star Son wins or loses; all that matters is the changing of the odds.

I start to sweat profusely. If Star Son comes in first, questions will be asked as to why the odds have dropped so low that the suckers in Podunk scream they been had, which of course they been. The guys behind Charlie do not like such surprises, and they have been known to eliminate the causes thereof. If Star Son loses, I will owe Max eleven big ones plus interest, which I am not able to pay at the moment—or at any moment till the end of time. My future is clearly full of pain and suffering. If the track bosses or Charlie's boys don't get me, Two-ton for sure will. I am in very deep doo-doo without a shovel, and I have to think fast.

With maybe ten seconds to spare I dive for the betting window and put down my mad money—the grand I'd squirreled away in my shirt pocket—on a longshot named Last Hope who is paying fifty to one if he should happen to win. Trouble is, this nag's record is so bad it's a surprise he's still being entered in races and not being served in a doggie dish somewhere. But like his name, he is for sure my last hope.

The whole race takes less than two minutes, but it feels like forever. All the while I am screaming so loud you'd have thought Two-ton caught me. The screaming is mainly because Last Hope is trailing the field and isn't moving anywhere but backwards. Horseplayers are considered very devout, as they are seen to pray every time their pony runs; I know because I am prone to such behavior. This time, though, I raise the ante by swearing I'll never bet on a horserace again if only Last Hope wins. My very life and seamless body depend on him.

Don't let anyone ever tell you prayers are not answered. When Smart Son comes around the far turn and starts to break out of the number three position, the mount in the lead stumbles and almost falls. Smart Son and practically the whole rest of the field are tight behind him. They lose their stride, pile up, and run every which way but straight. Last Hope, way behind as he is, skirts around the tangle and, no doubt surprised at actually seeing a clear track in front of him, takes off like he is heading for horse heaven. He pounds across the finish line two lengths in front. Last Hope won it! He actually won it! To make things even better, Smart Son runs out

of the money, which development no doubt satisfies Charlie's friends and the track bosses, too.

I rent a limo to take me and my money home. The first thing I do is to pay Max the eleven large I owe him, plus interest. He grumbles a lot because he hasn't made the big killing I'd promised him, but I don't care. I have enough green left over so I can now get away from Max and Two-ton forever. All that screaming and praying I did, while seeing my life flash before my eyes like there was no tomorrow, was an experience I do not wish to repeat. I have bigger plans for my days ahead.

Before I leave town, I run into Charlie again. He pats me on the head and says I've advanced to his very tippy-top level. He wants to set me up in Las Vegas in a classy hotel to pull the same stunt at some western tracks. I say thanks but no thanks. No more ponies for me. Besides, you don't fool with those boys in Las Vegas. They got a whole desert to lose your vital signs in and I don't need that aggravation.

I decide to find peace of mind and body far from the big city hustle. I take my mad money and go into a nice safe business. I now book cockroach races in Tijuana. You'd be surprised how fast those little buggers can run.

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FICTION

Go West, Young Man

Larry Tritten



Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/97

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On the run from a marriage that had gone bad, depressed and without plan or goal, Riggins drove westward. On automatic pilot, he thought as he watched the lengths of yellow in the center of the highway rush toward him and streak interminably away. He had gone for a drive in Tallahassee on Saturday morning, wanting to think things over, and before he had realized what he was doing, he was in Alabama and approaching the Mississippi state line. He knew then that he was headed out West, taking Horace Greeley's advice, Go West, young man! He sought space and horizons, where he would be able to think without feeling boxed in, surrounded. All he had with him was ninety dollars in his wallet, a credit card that was nearly totaled, and the clothes he wore. At some point he could call Nadine and make arrangements for her to send his things. Not that he owned much: a few clothes, some books, his paintings and art supplies. He didn't want to see Tallahassee again, and didn't want to see Nadine, and he knew that feeling was mutual.

Crossing into Mississippi, Riggins seemed to come slowly out of his trance as the import of his decision sank in. A sky that had been gray as weath-

ered iron all day brightened slightly to admit a sudden effusion of light through the clouds as the sun went down, and the change lifted Riggins' spirit. Pine forests crowded the horizon, and the sunlight made a shimmering silver display on the water of a bayou where crab boats were picturesquely silhouetted against the sky. An old battered pickup truck passed him as he slowed to take it all in, a red bird dog staring at him from the truck's bed, a peeling bumper sticker announcing LEAD, FOLLOW, OR GET OUT OF THE WAY!

Wow! Riggins thought. The message seemed to be specifically directed at him. The truth was he had been in a holding pattern for years, and it was what had finally destroyed his marriage. He was confident that he had the talent to succeed as an artist, a painter whose style was a unique form of abstract impressionism, but convinced that he needed at least ten thousand dollars to buy seven or eight months devoted to just his art, he had continued to work at a series of tedious, dull jobs that sapped his energy.

A sign along the side of the highway said POND-RAISED CATFISH, LIP-SMACKIN' GOOD—ONE MILE. Riggins realized that he was very hungry. He kept glancing at the sunset sky, appreciat-

ing the scene with a painter's eye. It was going to be a visual feast, he realized, as he went west.

A mile ahead a restaurant, dilapidated and boarded-up, with a painted picture of a catfish above the doorway, came into sight. A few hundred yards farther on, all bright glass and plastic, a McDonald's appeared, filled with people lined up for the prefabricated food. Riggins shook his head and muttered, "Jesus," under his breath.

A few miles farther he pulled into the Sugarcane Motel. The woman behind the counter reminded him of the woman at Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergère*, although less stylishly dressed in a sundress whose red was just slightly redder than that of her sunburned arms and shoulders.

The room was tidy and riotously colored, miniature ruffled drapes in the red and white design of an Italian restaurant's tablecloth decorating the small window, the quilt on the bed a pattern of polka-dotted blue that would have startled Seurat. A single print on the wall showed a harlequin with a mandolin. Riggins stepped out of the room before he could become vertiginous, then saw a convenience store across the road. He walked over, poured a cup of coffee from a full pot on a burner, and se-

lected two fishwiches wrapped in cellophane from a tray on the counter. He was skeptical about the fishwiches but discovered that they weren't half bad. He ate them in his room, watching a Mississippi newscaster on the TV set angled down toward the bed from a fixture high on the wall.

Riggins awakened in darkness and was on the road before the orange and apricot pallor of the rising sun colored the sky. He still didn't know where he was going, but he was certain now what he intended to do. He would stop at some small town in a Western state, a place large enough to feature some of a city's cosmopolitan attractions, such as a theater, a bookstore, and the like, and there he would sell the car and make a stand, painting fulltime. He would be lucky to get two thousand dollars for the Volvo, but it would give him a start, and he could worry about money when that time came. And if he failed, at least he would always know that he had taken a chance on his talent.

Riggins crossed the line into Louisiana, thinking that Texas and the beginning of the West lay not far ahead. After a couple of hours the sky darkened again, and a thunderstorm brought sheets of rain with it that obscured the cottonfields

and groves of pecan trees alongside the road, the sound of the rain and thunder making him shut off the radio, which could no longer be heard clearly. He pulled over and had a late lunch at a diner called The Louisiana Purchase, fresh crabcakes which he ate at a table while the rain roared down outside an open screen door and truckdrivers talked and laughed loudly at the nearby counter.

When he left the diner, the rain had stopped, displaying a fresh, clean-smelling world through which Riggins drove toward the Texas state line, leaving the radio off and singing oldies to himself, feeling a fierce resolve building in him.

Entering Texas, he expected to find landscape like that in the Roadrunner cartoons, yellow desert and stark mesas, but was surprised to encounter green woodlands. Yet soon enough there was a rust brown adobe motel that reminded Riggins of the Alamo, and he parked in its courtyard, went to rent a room, then drove to a Mexican restaurant up the road and treated himself to a huge combination plate. Back at the motel he fell asleep watching TV.

In the morning Riggins set out, ready for the Texas of Western movies, and quickly found himself on broad, flat land, big ranch houses visible from the

highway, horses and cows standing in fields as bleak as brimstone. A tumbleweed materialized from nowhere as if to represent the West symbolically and blew wildly into the front of the car. Riggins drove for a long while accompanied by barbed wire and wooden fences, no buildings in sight, a rowdy wind buffeting the car.

Late in the afternoon rain pelted the car again, and he decided to quit for the day—he was in no particular hurry. This time the motel consisted of glum, boxlike units that reminded Riggins of a painting by Gugliemi called *Terror in Brooklyn*, but he was feeling too much incipient excitement about his life to let the place depress him. Besides, he noted as he got out of the car, in the distance there were blue mountains whose tops were hidden in drifting clouds.

The next morning Riggins set out in a near trance of expectation. He drove for hours, visualizing himself in some remote, mountain-bordered town, painting happily, producing terrific work, getting to know the people. He drove into the mountains and kept going, north by northwest, watching as the forests came right down to the road and made it seem as if he were going through a dark green tunnel.

The sun slipped down behind

a mountain, leaving a gray-blue twilight, and Riggins drove on. He could almost feel his heart beating with mounting excitement. What he should do, he thought, was stop at the next motel, but oddly he felt anything but tired, felt, in fact, like celebrating the decision he'd made about his future.

Celebrating . . . When Riggins saw the roadside store ahead, he smiled and nodded. Yellow, blue, and red beer signs lit up its windows. An antique gas pump that probably hadn't worked in thirty years stood out front. Riggins pulled into the gravel driveway. Fortunately, he had plenty of gas, he thought, but a bottle of beer sounded very good. Of course it wasn't a good idea to drink while driving, and in fact he'd never done it, but now he actually craved a beer.

Just one. That couldn't hurt. Riggins got out of the car and walked around in the driveway, stretching his legs. Then he went into the store. A bell rang above the doorway, announcing his presence, and as he stepped inside, he saw a door in back that presumably led into the storekeeper's living quarters. It opened, and a man of about seventy came out, striving to arrange a mildly cordial expression. From the back the sound of a cheering crowd and a fight announcer's voice could be heard.

Riggins saw the bank of glass-doored coolers across the room and went to them. There was an impressive variety of beer, domestic and foreign. He scanned the six-packs. He was an occasional beer drinker, although anything but a connoisseur, and had always felt that one brand tasted pretty much like another. With that in mind he reached for a brand whose colorful labels caught his eye, not even registering its name. He took a six-pack to the counter.

"That do ya?" the old man asked, opening a brown paper bag.

"That'll do me," Riggins said. Then, after a moment of thought, "How far's the next motel?"

The old man rang up the sale. "That'd be five or six miles up the highway, just past the Lodge. Big old house made outa lodgepole pines, and a big stone chimney . . ."

Back on the road, Riggins eased a bottle out of the six-pack on the seat beside him, then set the six-pack down on the floorboards and settled the bottle delicately between his legs, twisting off the cap. He lifted the bottle, took a swallow, and sighed with pleasure. Very good. Just what did I get? he wondered, and held up the bottle to read the label. The first thing he saw was the red ban-

ner that displayed the word Nonalcoholic.

Well, *hell*, Riggins thought, mildly irritated. He chuckled, shaking his head. So much for the hasty consumer. He never had understood by what logic anyone might drink nonalcoholic beer. It seemed absurd.

It did taste like beer, though, he had to admit. He took another drink, then another, and then without thinking much about it finished the bottle. The twilight had been replaced by a pale moon-illuminated darkness, and on both sides of the highway myriad black shapes of fir and spruce trees towered, giving Riggins a vaguely claustrophobic feeling. There were few other cars on the road. Riggins studied the roadside ahead as the glare of his headlights lit it up, looking for the lodge the storekeeper had mentioned. He found himself reaching for another beer, then checked himself. "No, thanks," he muttered. He put the bottle between his legs, twisted off the cap, then rolled down the window and poured the beer out. He put the empty bottle back in the six-pack and took out another full one. *Nonalcoholic* beer. *Jesus*. Riggins emptied the four remaining bottles, replacing them in the six-pack. The moment he finished doing it he saw the pulsing red light in the rear view mirror. A

police car. Instinctively he slowed even though he was barely doing the speed limit. He assumed that the car would pass him, but as it drew quickly closer, he heard an echoic voice on a loudspeaker command him to pull over.

Riggins tried to think what the reason could be: he wasn't speeding, his license plate was up-to-date, no taillights were broken . . . He glanced at the six-pack of empties, then felt a surge of relief. And he hadn't been drinking *alcoholic beverages*. He smiled at the irony of the situation. Now he was positively happy about his fortuitous choice of brands back at the store.

There was a broad shoulder on the road ahead, and Riggins eased onto it, slowing, and rolled to a stop. He turned the ignition key and switched his lights to dim, watching in the rear view mirror as the police car pulled up several yards behind him. He waited, feeling uneasy. Although *he hadn't done anything wrong*.

The door of the police car opened, and Riggins saw a big man step slowly and cautiously out. The headlights of his car illuminated the interior of Riggins' car. The man was *very* big, solidly built, and wore a tan uniform. And Riggins could see the

presence of a very big pistol in a holster at his hip.

Riggins rolled down his window. The piney smell of the night air was exhilarating. He could hear the sound of the man's shoes crunching the gravel as he walked slowly toward him.

When the man stood beside his window, Riggins gave him a quick, oblique look, not wanting to seem in the least challenging.

"Where's the fire?" the officer asked.

The remark was so trite that Riggins had to make an effort not to show any reaction.

"No fire, officer," he said compliantly. What the *hell*? Riggins thought. He hadn't been speeding! He added, "I've been watching the speedometer. I don't think I was speeding."

"Don't think so?"

Riggins got his first good look at the man and slid his glance just as quickly away. The man's face reminded him of an Easter Island statue. Monolithic and impassive.

"How about drinking?"

"Drinking?" Riggins repeated the word flatly.

"Were you drinking? Sir?" The last word was added with a clear undertone of sarcasm.

"No, I—"

"Because you smell like you were," the officer said in a voice whose words were delivered

with slow deliberation, like a series of slow verbal punches. Riggins saw that he was looking past him at the six-pack on the floorboards.

"No, I . . ." Riggins reached down and took one of the bottles out of the six-pack. "These are *nonalcoholic*," he said, and felt a foolish smile distorting his mouth.

"Uh-huh."

The response was so obtuse that Riggins felt a flare of indignant anger. "No, really," he said, and held the bottle out to show the officer. "Take a look."

But the man looked instead into Riggins' eyes. "Step out of the car," he said. "Asshole."

Hearing the last word, Riggins suddenly realized that he was in a very bad situation. It meant that the man had abandoned the formality his job required, and Riggins suddenly saw him as extremely menacing. He got out of the car, still holding the bottle.

"Will you just take a look at the bottle?" Riggins asked, struggling to keep his tone steady.

"I *smell* it on you, mister," the officer said with contempt. He wrenched the bottle from Riggins' hand and tossed it toward the trees. "You might get a laugh in Florida with this routine," he said. "But *not here*." Riggins saw his face change

quickly from impassive to enraged. "You know why? Sir?"

"I—" Riggins' mind groped for the right words.

"A drunk driver killed my wife!"

The words stunned Riggins, and he stared at the officer with a painful expression. "But I *haven't been drinking*," he declared in a strained voice.

"*Killed my wife*," the officer repeated solemnly, and Riggins saw his eyes alight with scarcely suppressed disgust. Then he was abruptly jerked around to face his car and felt the officer pressing his head down onto the roof of the car, kicking lightly at one of his ankles as he snapped, "Spread 'em!" Riggins had seen *Cops* often enough to automatically assume the proper position for being frisked, bracing his palms on the top of the car and spreading his legs. A hand rummaged roughly along his body and down his legs, then roughly grabbed the back of his pants to haul him erect.

"You won't kill anybody tonight," the officer said in a soft, self-satisfied voice. "Not in jail."

Riggins realized that he had to prove he hadn't been drinking. He tried again. "Officer, would you please—"

To his dismay he was silenced by a gesture as ominous as it was seemingly harmless: the

man put the fingers of one hand lightly against Riggins' lips, staring into his eyes and smiling coldly.

"Shut. Up." It was a command, with all the weight of the authority of the uniform behind it.

And they were alone. Very much alone, Riggins realized with growing fear.

"Stand over there," the officer told him, pointing to a spot a few yards distant. Riggins backed away, feeling completely helpless as the officer took a flashlight out of his back pocket. Holding his gun in the other hand, and glancing every few seconds significantly at Riggins, he searched the back seat of the car, then the glove compartment. The beam of light played momentarily over the six-pack of empty bottles, then he was on the far side of the car, glaring over its roof at Riggins. "Now," he said, "get in, and I want you to follow me."

Wondering remotely why he hadn't been asked to show his driver's license, Riggins started to protest, but this time the officer merely held up an admonitory forefinger. "Not. Word. One," he said with heavy finality.

Crazy, *crazy*, Riggins thought nervously as he watched the officer stalk back to his own car and get in, then wait for him to do the same.

"Follow me," he called to Riggins.

Riggins got in his car, noticing that his hands were shaking slightly as he braced them for a moment on the steering wheel. The officer started his car and drove slowly past Riggins, staring dourly at him for a moment as he passed, and Riggins got an indistinct look at what appeared to be a gold star on the car door. As he started his car, he wondered what kind of policeman had stopped him. A highway patrolman? A sheriff? The whole thing seemed peculiar to say the least. Not having been asked for his driver's license. Having been accused of being drunk but without having been given the well-known preliminary tests—walking a straight line, touching the tip of his nose, and the like. But then Riggins thought about the movies he'd seen about high-handed and autocratic small-town lawmen who pretty much did things their own way. Thinking about that filled him with a sudden tension.

Was he going to be jailed without even being tested for his blood's alcohol content? No, of course not—at the station he would breathe into the balloon or whatever the procedure was; and that would vindicate him. And he would *insist* that someone look at the damned bottles! This was just a dumb mistake

on the part of the law, and he would be on his way soon enough. They might needle him a little, make him sweat, but that was part of the deal, the way some clannish small-town types enjoy hazing an outsider. Something like the initiation ritual in college.

Riggins had talked himself into relaxing slightly, fixing his gaze on the silhouette of the officer in the car ahead. He was driving very slowly so Riggins would have no trouble keeping pace, and Riggins had the uncomfortable feeling that the man was studying him stonily in his rear view mirror as they drove.

The dense forest that had bordered the highway for so long started to thin out, and occasional houses set far back from the highway started to appear, apparently farm or ranch buildings. The town must be near, Riggins thought with uneasy anticipation.

Abruptly the police car turned off the highway onto a side road, surprising Riggins. What the hell? he wondered. For a moment he entertained the wild fantasy of floorboarding the gas pedal and streaking down the highway, escaping before the officer could turn around and follow him. But the fantasy evaporated in a moment. The man had a radio. A gun. And he

probably would think nothing of driving at a speed that would terrify Riggins.

Riggins followed the car. But something, he was sure, was not . . . *right*. And that feeling was confirmed by the realization that the road they were on was unpaved. Where could it possibly go? Not to a jail. He was sure the town couldn't be in this direction.

A few minutes later the shape of a big house appeared ahead, set back from the road in a clearing. Riggins followed the police car along a short driveway to the house. The police car came to a stop at the end of the driveway, Riggins pulling up behind it.

The officer got out of his car and looked back at Riggins, who now felt a chill of anxiety as he sat there, confused and wary.

"Outa the car, boy!" the officer called.

From "sir" with a sarcastic undertone to "boy." I've been demoted, Riggins thought.

He got out of the car. The dark house stood ominously against the moonlit sky. They were surrounded by trees and silence. A cool breeze had begun to blow, and Riggins noticed the branches of the trees waving in the near distance as it swept through them.

The officer approached Riggins slowly. His blank expres-

sion had been replaced by a tight, sour smile.

"That 'snice jacket," the officer said. "My size."

Riggins felt a sudden sense of outrage as he realized that the man was apparently going to steal his jacket, but it was dwarfed almost immediately by another realization: he had slurred his words for a reason. Riggins had somehow missed before in his fear and distraction. Suddenly he could smell the liquor on the officer's breath.

He had been drinking! No, more accurately, he was *drunk*. *Incredible*, Riggins thought, stunned by the irony. Then, with numbing certainty, it occurred to him that he was in a situation far more dangerous than any he'd imagined.

"Take it off," the officer said.

Riggins was wearing a black and white nylon warmup jacket that his mother, who had died a few months earlier, had given him for his birthday. It was something he wouldn't part with easily.

"Take it off!"

Swallowing dryly, Riggins took off the jacket and held it out to the officer, who took it. He stepped back, and his fingers touched briefly and lightly at the butt of his gun, an implicit message in the gesture. His sour smile was full of bravura confidence. Watching Riggins care-

fully, he slipped off his uniform jacket and put on Riggins' jacket.

"Fits," he said. He looked at Riggins with amusement. "Incident'ly, that wife story was a crock."

Riggins said, "I haven't been drinking. You know that. What's going on?"

"You don't get it?" The smile was gone, but there was still amusement in his eyes.

"No," Riggins said in a voice that came out as little more than a whisper.

"This's my place, and you're my guest," the officer said. "You'll stay here . . ."

"Stay?" Riggins asked, glancing at the house. "I . . . don't—"

"Yep," the officer interrupted. "Stay. Get it? *Stay*. Hundred years from now you'll still be here."

Riggins was seized by a fear so great that it made him feel immobile as he comprehended the meaning of the words. In the utter silence that ensued, his mind seemed as immobile as his body, clear thought run aground on a psychic reef of terror.

"Why?" he finally managed to say.

The officer gave him a penetrating stare. "It's what I do," he said. "Jus' that. Now, you want t'scream, beg, go on. Some do. Some don't."

I'm going to die, Riggins

thought with dumbfounded realization. *Just like that*. But even as the inescapable fact of it hit him, a sort of icy control came over him. He was surprised to find himself returning the man's stare without flinching, and he noticed now that he was not a stolid presence as it had appeared but was actually swaying almost imperceptibly from the waist up in the manner of one who has drunk way too much. Yet his expression, though now Riggins also saw a virtually somnolent lidding of eyes above his flushed cheeks, was one of nearly blasé confidence.

He was drunk and full to the brim with self-satisfaction and vanity.

"Without that gun I could kick your redneck ass," Riggins heard himself say in a thin voice.

The officer absorbed this with surprise, then responded with a chuckle. "You silly wimp," he said, and grinned. "I ain't holdin' a gun."

"Man to man I'd kick your pig ass," Riggins went on, going with it. His mind was working very clearly now, and it told him that a primal masculine challenge from someone he considered a "wimp" might just considerably, if only for a moment, diminish such a man's reflex inclination to reach for his

gun. Given that as a possible edge, along with the man's drunken condition, Riggins might have a chance if he moved with absolute decisiveness.

Which he did.

Empowered by the knowledge that his life was at stake, Riggins drove against the man like a football linebacker. His idea was to follow up the impact instantly with a well-aimed blow of his fist. But even given the surprise, there was no time for that because the man caught him in a sort of clinging hug, and they staggered several yards together, the man hanging on fiercely, Riggins flailing his right arm ineffectually in an attempted punch. They reeled away from each other, and Riggins had a fleeting impression of the man's face, both surprised and enraged; then fear spurred him instantly forward again, this time the groping collision jolting the man, whose equilibrium was already undermined by liquor, to his knees. There was a moment during which he looked up with quiet fury at Riggins, then he was reaching very casually for his gun, his expression having become that of a businesslike exterminator. Riggins watched numbly; his reflexes seemed to have frozen, and he realized, nauseated, that the hesitation was to cost him his life. But then, even as the man

found his holster empty, Riggins awesomely discovered the gun in his own hand, held in his insensate grip. Thought and action had become such a blurred tangle that he hadn't even realized his success.

The man hauled himself to his feet and stared wildly at Riggins for a moment before taking a bold step toward him. Riggins could smell the reek of whisky. "You silly wimp," the man said breathlessly, and took another step, a big hand reaching out.

The gun leaped in Riggins' hand, the pistol grip chafing his finger, and then the weapon seemed to settle solidly and firmly into his grasp. The officer held out both arms as if in a parody of swimming, then sprawled face down in the same motion, arms outstretched. In the moonlight Riggins watched smoke flow undulantly from the gun's barrel.

The first thing he thought was, *Go West, young man!*

"Oh yeah," he muttered.

After Riggins checked the body to confirm the man's death, noticing in the process that his jacket was wet and shiny with blood, he put on the man's uniform jacket as protection against the wind, which seemed much colder now because it highlighted the icy sensation of the rivulets of sweat running down his face and body. He

checked the pockets of his own jacket to make sure there was nothing in them that could identify him.

He thought about the situation for a few minutes, then decided there was no reason to spend another minute at the scene of the . . . he had to pause thoughtfully before substituting the word killing for the word crime in his mind. He was horrified by what he had just done, but as he remembered the man referring to other victims of his (and how many Riggins could only wonder), the act was easy to accept without guilt. The man had been a psycho. A monster.

Riggins returned to his car and got behind the wheel, throwing the gun onto the seat beside him. From the glove compartment he took a cloth he kept for wiping the windows. He polished the gun with it, then started the car and drove back down the road. When he turned onto the highway, he drove for about half a mile, then pulled over and threw the gun at the dark shapes of the nearby trees.

Another half mile along the highway he shivered involuntarily, which reminded him that he was still wearing the man's jacket. He should get rid of it as soon as possible, he knew. He was about the pull over again, but a pair of headlights in the

rear view mirror curtailed the action.

A couple of minutes later an oasis of bright light appeared ahead. A roadside restaurant. Riggins was still wired with tension, and the chance to sit down to a burger and a cup of coffee seemed like the best thing in the world to him. He eased the car into the driveway, then glanced around furtively and quickly took off the jacket, stowing it under the front seat. He got out of the car and walked to the restaurant, seeing through a long front window so clean that it displayed the inside with the clarity of an image on a movie screen that the place was almost empty.

Inside, at the end of the counter, the counterman was talking to a single customer, a heavyset man wearing old Levi's and a black sweatshirt with the message *Please, Lord . . . let me prove to You that winning the lottery won't \$poil me*. The customer had been talking animatedly but stopped as Riggins appeared, both men glancing at him placidly. Riggins gave them a vague nod of greeting, then decided to sit in a booth. As he approached the booths, he saw that each of their tabletops had been adorned with a Western-theme painting by some local artist. He chose a booth whose table depicted a pack horse

cringing against a blizzard wind. Pretty good stuff, Riggins thought. To abbreviate the ritual of ordering, he called to the counterman, "I'll have a cheeseburger and fries, medium, black coffee."

The man gave him the high sign and went to pour the coffee. Riggins went over to the counter and got the cup, and the counterman nodded courteously. Back in the booth, he started to appraise what had happened to him, but he was distracted as the man at the counter continued with the talk Riggins' arrival had interrupted.

"You can go into any bar in town and hear the same thing, Walt," the man said. "He's just gone too goddamned far for his own good. The son of a bitch was always mean, but the consensus is now that he's crazy. And he's pushed it to the limit. . . . Did you see that story on *Sixty Minutes* a couple of years ago—about the town bully in . . . someplace in Nebraska, I think it was? Tough character who would come into town and push everybody around, had his own little reign of terror going. Until somebody shot him. And took care of the problem just like that!"

Riggins looked at the man, who took a drink of his coffee and nodded sagely to himself. "He wasn't the sheriff, but I don't think that makes a

damned bit of difference if you listen to the talk in town. Not now! What he did to Wally Keen was the straw to break the camel's back! And anyway, everybody *knows* he's so goddamned crooked the Mafia could take lessons from him. You've heard the stories about the cars he's fenced over in Utah and the money he's been putting in three or four different out-of-state banks—fifteen, twenty grand at a time."

The man paused, and Riggins listened to the sizzling sound of his cheeseburger frying, contemplating what he'd just heard with a growing sense of relief. He waited attentively for the man to continue, but when he did, it was to initiate a new topic—the killing his brother was making buying logs, stumpage, standing timber, and timberland.

But Riggins had heard enough to make his night, and he concentrated on the sound of the burger frying, anticipating something that would completely upstage a Big Mac.

He ate quickly, eager to get back on the road and get rid of the sheriff's jacket, to put this part of his journey behind him. Outside, in the driveway, he looked at the mountains surrounding him and felt a renewed vigor for the prospect of his future. There was still a residue of

tension in his mind and body, but it was ebbing fast.

A mile or so along the highway Riggins pulled into a deserted rest area. He took the jacket from under the seat and carried it to one of the garbage cans, which was already nearly overflowing and circled by a few errant yellowjackets. At the last moment it occurred to him to check the pockets. He felt something in a buttoned inside pocket. Unbuttoning it, he pulled out a fat business-sized envelope, and a stack of currency spilled out of it onto his shoes. Riggins balked for a moment, staring, then quickly picked up the bills and envelope. He stuffed the jacket into the garbage can and went to his car. Sitting in the front seat with the door open, he counted the money. There were eighty-fifty-dollar bills, fifty-seven hundred-dollar bills, sixteen twenties, and a typed note that said *Your cut*.

After sitting there quietly for a full five minutes, Riggins drove away. His heart was pounding heavily again, but with anticipation rather than tension.

Another mile or so along the highway his headlights picked out the figure of a hitchhiker. Drawing close, he saw that he was very young, probably about nineteen. He was well-groomed but looked forlorn there in the dark isolation of the looming mountains. He had a sign reading SEATTLE that he held up almost timidly as Riggins approached.

Riggins stopped the car about fifty yards past him, then leaned over to lock the door on the passenger side. He motioned to the young man, who came trotting tentatively up to his window.

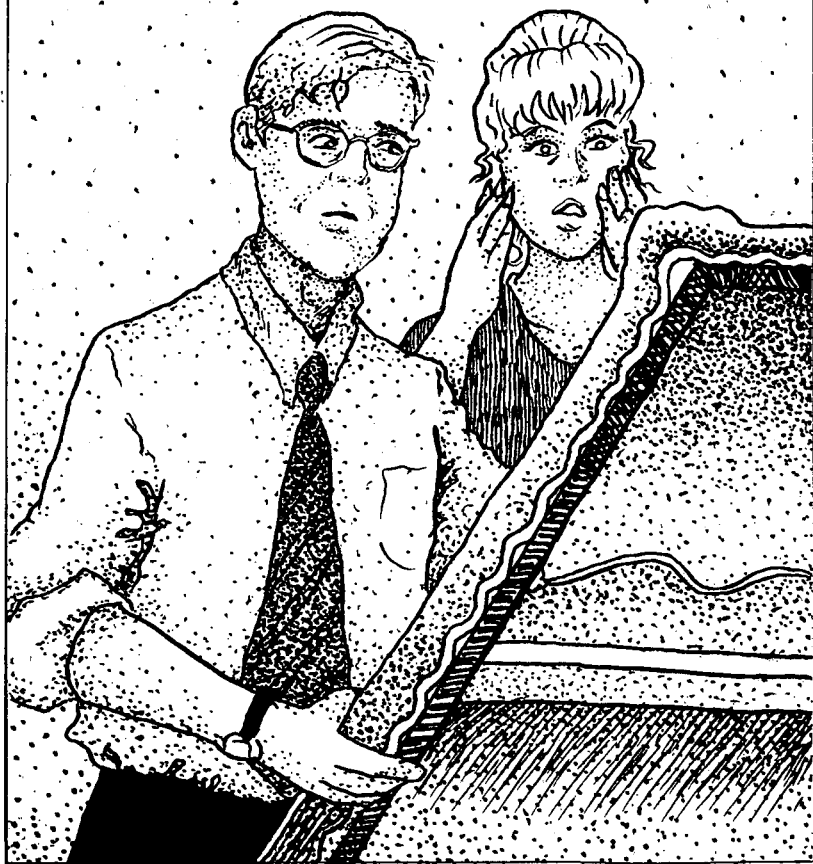
"You know, there are some weird people in the world," Riggins said. "Hitchhiking is one way to meet them. I don't pick up strangers, but . . ." He pushed three hundreds into the young man's hand. "Get a bus!"

And Riggins drove off. He was a great believer in karma. Before long he realized that he was actually smiling, something he hadn't done much of for weeks but which he expected to make a habit.

FICTION

The Witch and Upright Maxwell

Angela Zeman



Old Mrs. Bachrach tottered, panting, across the vast room inhabited by the clerical staff of the brokerage firm. Like a flattened ship's prow, a broad parcel wound voluminously with brown paper and clutched against her chest advanced before her. The tape fastening an end had broken loose, and the paper unwound until she had a long tail of it drifting behind her like a Chinese dragon in a New Year's parade.

B. J. Maxwell hurried to her and grabbed the package a moment before the whole thing was due to disintegrate. She thrust it at him with a merry gasp. "I knew you'd catch us in time!" Her slightly askew features betrayed her unshakable good humor as she blew a wisp of frizzled hair away from her left eye.

His exasperation melted. Her constant cheer, like a force, kept him rushing to aid, to open, to carry, to shield Naomi Bachrach from the difficulties she chronically attracted in her headlong progress through her happy world. He sometimes envied her her untroubled point of view.

"B. J.," she began as he piloted her to a comfortable chair in the cubicle that served as his office. "Of *all* my friends I think you're truly the nicest one—now I *mean* this!" She pressed a hand to her billowing chest. "No mat-

ter how often I call, you stop and listen to my silly chatter when I *know* you're busy with important things. No, I know it's true, don't try to be gallant. Therefore, dearest B. J., I've decided that you're the one to trust with the care of my last little picture while I go away on my cruise." Gasping, she sank back into her chair, having forgotten to breathe during her determined speech.

B. J. blinked behind wire-rimmed glasses. Finally he pointed at the bundle propped against his desk. "It's a picture?"

"Yes, dear. I've been told it's worth something, and I don't like going away leaving it unlooked-after."

He gazed at it in dismay. "It's pretty large, Naomi. I don't have a place to store something that size in my office, and if it's val—"

Naomi battled to hold back tears. "Just for two weeks? I saw a program on TV about a cruise to Hawaii, how healthy the air was—it's so pretty there!—and I know that's what I need. I'm sure that if I go on this cruise I'll feel better again right away."

B. J. bit his lip and tried not to notice the incipient tears, but of course he *had* noticed them. "You're not feeling well? Have you seen a doctor?"

"I talked to Dr. Sams. He

treats all my friends. Not you, of course. I mean all my *other* friends—”

“Surely you don’t mean a veterinarian. A cat doctor?” B. J. had long ago discovered that, except for himself, all her friends were cats. Mrs. Bachrach had found four-legged creatures much more tolerant of her particular quirks than the two-legged creatures of her acquaintance. B. J. could hardly blame her for her preference.

“Why, that’s *just* what he is! Aren’t you clever? Yes, and devoted to his profession. I’ve often wished I could’ve learned to be a veterinarian when I was young. To take such expert care of little kitties like he does . . . He told me he was sure I was doing the right thing.”

“Well, that depends on what’s wrong, don’t you think? Ah, what is wrong?” He was keenly aware how brave he was to ask that question. What if it was one of those terrifying female things?

“Nothing to worry about, dear, I just don’t feel quite *right*. Dr. Sams says I probably just need a vacation. And you know, as soon as he said that, I realized that I couldn’t remember the last time I went somewhere. And the pictures of Hawaii looked so heavenly . . .” She shivered with pleasure, sending her powdered flesh into gelatinous waves.

She touched the back of his hand. “If you’ll just keep my little picture safe for me so that I can go away with peace of mind. Please, B. J.? I couldn’t rest at night, even in Hawaii, if I had to worry about it.”

He gazed helplessly into eyes as blue and untainted as a country brook, where lurked a bottomless supply of trust for all those who occupied her rose-tinted world—namely him, her cats, and now, it seemed, this Dr. Sams. And evidently a television pitchman who’d told her to sail to Hawaii. Well, she could’ve gotten worse advice. He sighed.

“You’re sure you’ve got nothing a—uh—people doctor should check out? You’re not feeling really ill?”

“Noooooh! And it’s going to be so much fun. And, oh yes. I’ll need some money.”

He steeled himself, hoping he wouldn’t have to advance her a loan from his own limp pockets but knowing very well that he’d help her if necessary. “How much?”

A giggle lurked behind the frown she now produced for his benefit—she was trying to look as if she were thinking carefully, a process he’d been attempting to teach her for years. “About—two hundred dollars?”

He blinked. “This cruise costs only two hundred dollars?”

"Don't be silly." Now she giggled out loud. "I've already paid for the cruise out of my household money. It took all I had, though, and I'd like just a bit more. I want to bring back presents. For my friends, to make up for leaving the sweet dears behind."

Two hundred dollars to buy guilt presents for cats, he thought, groaning to himself but relieved. It could've been worse. He wrote the check. He'd been handling Mrs. Bachrach's financial affairs since her husband, an antiques dealer, had died eight years ago. She received a modest income from her husband's investments, but since her needs almost completely involved a slavish devotion to her feline "friends" and few extravagances, she managed fairly well.

"You take such good care of me, B. J." She stood and gave him a fond peck on the cheek, leaving behind a fuschia smear.

B. J. ushered her out of the brokerage firm to the bank in the same building, making sure she had no difficulty cashing the check, and put her safely into a taxi. As he waved farewell, he wondered where he could stow that big package—which was probably only a blown-up photo of her favorite cat.

In the end he took it home and shoved it under his bed. His wife hardly heard his explanations,

and the whole matter was forgotten by bedtime.

Eight days later B. J. arrived at work in time to hear his secretary receiving the news by telephone that Mrs. Bachrach had died in her sleep off the coast of Oahu. The ship's doctor posthumously diagnosed her trouble as an enlarged heart that had finally stopped. Her body was being shipped home by air. Even after sharing a weepy lunch with his secretary, who'd liked the elderly lady as much as he had, the picture in his possession eluded his thoughts until a few nights later.

B. J.'s wife Joyce reminded him of it over the dinner she'd thrown together after a long fruitless day of staring at the typewriter. Joyce was a novelist-to-be.

"You can be in charge of tomorrow night's dinner if you think you can do better on our budget," she snarled as she watched her husband poke at the green coated pasta with a fork.

In all fairness to Joyce, B. J. had begun the evening with the news that things at his office had progressed—or rather, declined—to so disastrous a point that B. J. and Joyce must soon file for personal bankruptcy. His income had been failing to cover more than a fraction of

their expenses for too long. That morning his manager had declared that by the end of the month B. J. must repay the now astronomical total of sums the firm had been steadily advancing him against future earnings. Unless B. J. could come up with some amazingly profitable new accounts in record time . . . B. J.'s silence when he reached that point in his speech revealed how hopeless he felt his prospects were.

Joyce, eyes hot with bitter tears, had said, "Correct me if I'm wrong, you stupid jerk, but doesn't filing for bankruptcy mean you can never work as a stockbroker again?"

B. J. felt tears creep into his own eyes as he had to nod yes.

"And of course—" Joyce's tone was now leaden with sarcasm—"you have absolutely no clue how to work at any other profession. Right? *Right!*"

Again B. J. could only nod.

Joyce's thoughts appeared to choke her for some moments. Then she managed to ask, "And that stupid stock market research letter you waste your working hours writing every day? The one you promised was going to make you famous and us rich? How many subscriptions have you gotten for that?"

B. J. hurriedly shoveled a large amount of pasta into his mouth and struggled to smile as

he chewed. And chewed. After he swallowed, he said, "Honey, you know yourself how tough it is to launch yourself as a writer. It's the same with getting recognition as a stock market expert."

"Expert, my butt! You can't even scrape together enough money to buy us decent food. Renee, down the hall, eats better than we do, and she makes minimum wage."

"Renee works in a restaurant. She brings leftovers home in her handbag. Maybe if you got a part-time job—"

"—Maybe that stupid cat picture upstairs is worth some money. *She* isn't coming back for it," she interrupted venomously. "Even if we could find a buyer, the proceeds would probably cover only a fast-food meal, but anything's better than starving."

She screwed up her mouth at him, making a kissing noise, and whined, "One last meal before being thrown out on the street, huh, please, B. J.?" She threw her fork at him.

B. J. recoiled. "I forgot all about that." He stared at his wife, suddenly anxious. "You haven't touched it, have you?"

"Who has the time? I work longer hours than *you* do, and I don't have a *secretary* to help me. Even with her help you've *failed* because you wasted time catering to old bags like Naomi

Bachrach. It should be a relief to you that she finally kicked off. Honestly, B. J., my dream means nothing to you. How are we going to live until I make it big?" She let out a sob.

"I take it this means you still refuse to get a paying job—" he began stiffly, but Joyce had already moved on to her next thought:

"Wonder what that picture is, exactly?"

Joyce rushed upstairs. B. J. sprinted anxiously behind. Scrabbling behind the unkempt bedclothes, panting as she tugged out the heavy parcel, Joyce ripped away the wrapping. B. J. hovered, arms outstretched as if to protect the painting from his wife . . . until he saw what it was.

Joyce sucked in her breath. B. J. whimpered, "My God."

She lurched to her feet and dropped it onto the bed.

"I'm glad we didn't look before. I would never have slept, knowing what it was—" he gasped.

"What is it, though?" breathed Joyce.

"It looks like a collage of oil sketches. Not a proper painting, I'd guess, but studies. Elaborate sketches, of different poses for . . . it looks like . . . the *Mona Lisa*! He probably picked the one he liked, then painted her that way, full size, on a separate canvas."

"Is it real?"

"Why would Mrs. Bachrach bother with something like this if it wasn't real? She only cared about cats, she wouldn't have *bought* anything unless it had a cat in it. In fact, she probably never bought this—I'll bet it belonged to her husband. He was an antiques dealer."

"Oh, what do *you* know. Good ol' B. J.—expert art critic and time waster," she sneered.

B. J.'s excitement cooled. "Doesn't matter what I think, anyway. It isn't ours. It goes in to her estate."

Joyce studied her husband. After a minute she stalked out of the bedroom, returning to her cold dinner. They said nothing to each other for the rest of the night.

Two bleak weeks passed, and then B. J. received a visit from a young man, a lawyer, the executor of Mrs. Bachrach's estate. He was the son of her deceased husband's best friend, as it turned out, and, like B. J., remembered the old lady fondly.

"Do you know who inherits it all?" he said after introductions and some tender sentiments had produced a companionable atmosphere. "Some Sams character who runs a cat hospital out in Queens."

"The vet?" B. J. was at first startled, although on reflection it didn't seem so odd. "She did

admire his work. I remember her saying she wished she'd been a vet like him."

"He's a vet, all right," growled the young man, whose name was Brian McKee. "A veteran of the correspondence school for con artists and conscienceless rats."

B. J. blinked.

"I went to his place to inform him about being her beneficiary. Turned out he'd been waiting for me. The cruise people had notified him of her death. She'd left her cats with him and had given his name to the travel agency in case of an emergency. Her bequest was intended to finance her cats' care, to refurbish his hospital, and to establish a fund for any stray cats he might run across that need help. She evidently envisioned him as some sort of general of a Feline Salvation Army. Hmmph! Well, you'll meet him. He wants all the stocks and whatever else is in her account to be liquidated."

"He'll have forms to fill out."

"He expects that. He said he intends selling everything of hers—house, furniture . . ." Brian looked as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. "Should've seen his hospital. Every animal there will be lucky to see next Christmas unless they can survive filth. She said she wants her money to be used to help as many 'unfortunate dears' as pos-

sible—her exact words. Well, if they weren't unfortunate before, they will be after he takes care of 'em."

"You seem pretty sure of this," ventured B. J. uncomfortably. "Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Like what? She had no family. Who's to object?"

After some silence, B. J. asked, remembering the painting, "Did she, uh, leave anything else besides her house, furniture, and uh, stock account?"

"Well, she'd been reputed to possess a small collection of old paintings and sketches from well-known artists."

"Wh-what do you mean, reputed?"

"They were listed in her will. But when I went to inspect her house, none could be found. After wasting a few days trying to track them down, I asked Sams if he knew anything about them. He got this peculiar look on his face, so I prodded. He admitted she'd been selling them off one by one and giving him the proceeds. I tell you, if I'd been an heir, I'd have taken him to court so fast—well, let's just say he didn't impress me as an upright citizen. Maybe it was the way he grinned while he told me about it. I asked him what he'd spent the money on; obviously it wasn't on that ramshackle hospital.

He told me—snickering, if you can believe it—‘Emergencies.’”

Right then B. J. opened his mouth to tell Brian about the painting in his possession. But Brian chose that same moment to look him in the eye and, after swallowing hard from emotion, say, “She thought you were the best. At our yearly meetings to discuss her will, she always mentioned you, how kind you were, listening to her ramble on over the phone when she was lonely. She knew her business wasn’t profitable enough to get that kind of attention from you. She thought of you as her closest friend, not just her broker.”

He reddened and went on in a lower voice. “I wish I could say the same for myself. I liked her, but I have to admit, I lost patience when she’d go on and on about all that cat stuff—I cut her off more often than not. I—I feel I’m partly to blame that she got taken in by that weasel vet. It burns me to think of him living the good life with her money. Her house was full of antiques that’ll bring in a good amount. Those cats will never benefit from one penny!”

Brian vented his frustration, and possibly his disappointment in himself, by delivering himself of yet more bitter invective against Sams. It was a mercy the poor woman had died before discovering how taken in she’d

been, he supposed as he finally subsided.

When Brian left, they clasped hands tightly, bonded in mutual hatred of Dr. Sams and affection for the kindly, deluded Mrs. Bachrach. It was only some moments later that B. J. realized he hadn’t mentioned the painting in his possession. He sat staring at Brian’s card for some minutes, but eventually only dropped it into his top desk drawer.

That night, after B. J. shared Brian’s news with Joyce, they picked at their watery spaghetti in an atmosphere that had been growing more hostile each day since the uncovering of Mrs. Bachrach’s painting . . . and of their need to declare bankruptcy.

Joyce had dusted the painting and propped it against the wall where a fireplace would have been, if they could have afforded an apartment with a fireplace. Its presence in the living room didn’t improve matters. It was with icily polite murmurs that he and Joyce went up to bed—together but separate.

Minutes lengthened into hours. B. J. couldn’t sleep. He tossed and squirmed on his side of the bed, unable to push Brian’s conversation from his mind. He wished he’d asked Brian how many paintings Mrs. Bachrach had owned before

selling them. He remembered her calling the one he now had her "last little picture." He wondered how many tens of thousands of her dollars Dr. Sams had squandered, and what he'd spent them on. Women, probably. Luscious food. Women . . . Food . . .

He'd just begun drifting off to sleep, with yowls of starving kitties creeping into his dreams, when a sharp noise from downstairs woke him.

He crept from the bed. After hearing another muted bump, he woke Joyce by clamping her mouth shut with his hand. Her eyes flashed open, and she stared up at him in astonished fury. When another thud from downstairs brought knowledge and tension into her gaze, he lifted his hand away.

After two or three deep breaths that were meant to be calming, B. J. tiptoed down the carpeted stairs. Light from a streetlamp filtered through the thin living room curtains, revealing a stodgy figure wearing a stocking mask and holding Mrs. Bachrach's painting up to the faint light as if trying to make out details.

In spite of his panic B. J. noted that the man was grasping the painting with both hands—not surprisingly, as the ornate frame was heavy. Realizing that if the intruder had a gun, he at

least wasn't holding it, B. J. flipped on the overhead light—and met Joe Alvione. A slightly huffy Joe Alvione, after he got over his fright.

"You coulda scared me to death, you moron, sneakin' up on me! Christ!" Joe lowered the painting gingerly to the ground. Within seconds the two men were grappling on the carpet, grunting with exertion and bumping painfully into furniture legs.

"Stop it! Stop it!" came a piercing shriek.

Both men paused to look up. Joyce hovered over them. Poised high to smash a head—or both heads, B. J. wasn't sure which—was a steel-shafted number one wood golf club gripped in her white-knuckled hands. The expression on her face brought them scrambling to their feet.

Joe lifted shaking hands and began backing away. "Now, missus . . ."

"Stop right there!" she screamed.

He stopped.

"Now—now, calm down, darling," begged B. J. in a quavery voice.

"Shut up!"

He blinked, and his mouth slowly shut.

A glint entered Joe's eyes. Without permission he lowered his hands and slowly straightened himself.

"Take off the mask," she hissed at Joe.

"Aw now, missus," whined Joe.

"Do it!"

He whipped the stocking from his face.

"You looked better with it on," she sneered.

Joe whistled softly. "A fire-breather." He glanced sympathetically at B. J.

"What's your name?" asked B. J., trying to appear as if he were in charge.

Joe sighed. "Guess you could I.D. me, anyway." He told them his name. "And I got no gun on me, so you can relax, lady. A piece means extra time, an' I ain't stupid. Wanta search to make sure, be my guest." He lifted his arms invitingly away from his portly figure. He wore a red plaid flannel shirt, baggy green work pants, and pristine white sneakers with the word "Cross-trainer" printed across the tongues. He looked like a grocer. "Give the club a rest, lady. Believe me, I'll stay put. I don't want you making no pumpkin pie outa my skull."

Joyce lowered the club slowly. B. J. relaxed slightly and gave Joe a covert grimace of gratitude.

"So," began Joe. "Where'd a coupla losers like you pick up a hot item like that? Izzit for real?"

Joyce bristled. "Who's a loser!"

Joe slid his eyes around the room in a pointed appraisal of their living quarters but wisely declined to answer.

B. J. examined their crook doubtfully. "Are you an—an art thief, Joe?"

Joe shot him a sarcastic look. "If I was, I wouldn't be here, would I? Hey, I know my limitations, but I ain't lived my whole life in a brown paper bag. The *Mona Lisa* ain't izzackly an obscure hunka art."

Joyce lifted a haughty eyebrow. "The painting's ours. We inherited it."

Joe's mouth twisted. "Save it, missus. That item's so hot it burnt my fingers just holding it."

Joyce's eyes narrowed as she stared at Joe, but he stared back, undaunted.

Joyce swiveled her gaze speculatively towards B. J. At that moment he could feel the painting turning "hot" just as if Joyce had grabbed it and run with it out the front door—and she hadn't budged.

His head began to move involuntarily from side to side. "No, Joyce," said B. J. "Nuh-uh. Don't even think—"

She interrupted. "Do you—*would* you happen to know where a painting like this could be sold, Mr. Alvione?"

Joe crossed his arms. "Oh, it's 'Mr. Alvione,' is it?" He shrugged. "Could be. Could be I could think better if that golf club were put away somewhere."

Joyce flung it across the room, where it smashed into a lamp. "Would you like some coffee, Mr. Alvione?"

Joe glanced shrewdly at B. J. "Her coffee worth drinking?"

B. J. shook his head, hardly realizing what he was doing.

"B. J.!" snarled his wife.

"You better make it," commanded Joe. B. J. left the room in a daze.

When he returned, tray in hand with three steaming cups of coffee, Joe had made himself comfortable in B. J.'s favorite chair, and Joyce had swept up the pieces of glass from the broken lamp and disposed of them. He handed cups around, feeling like Alice at the Queen's tea-party, his head hunched down between his shoulders in anticipation of the axe.

Without consulting B. J., Joyce and Joe reached an agreement on percentages. Since Joyce was understandably reluctant to allow Joe to take the painting with him to show a certain bigtime art fence he said he had in mind, Joyce took some photos of it in different lights and from different angles.

Promising to call in a few days, Joe departed with the film.

B. J. went to work the next morning feeling surrounded by a fog, hardly aware of his own actions—something he began to get used to as day followed day.

Joe returned as promised, a deal was confirmed, and the painting was exchanged for a certain amount of money four days later. To B. J. it seemed a shockingly enormous amount of money, even after Joe's cut.

To B. J.'s surprise, Joyce immediately handed a large portion of it to B. J. and told him in snarling tones what she wanted done with it. He obeyed. The next day he paid back in full the deficit he owed his brokerage firm, eliminating their need to file for bankruptcy.

The atmosphere at home became kinder when the painting left their living room and the threat of bankruptcy left their lives. Joyce began consulting a cookbook and elevated the quality of their diet, and also began initiating a few activities in bed that B. J. had nearly forgotten existed. B. J. perked up at these benefits and eventually formed the useful habit of repeating to himself Brian's comments about the infamous Dr. Sams whenever guilt threatened his growing complacency.

Then Lady Luck, always

capricious, turned her attention to the Maxwells.

First, B. J. sold an article to a prestigious financial newspaper. Soon after, to his astonishment, they asked for two more. After he delivered those, his editor proposed a lucrative contract for a weekly column, promising that he could advertise his market advice newsletter in the column. A few months later B. J.'s column was syndicated across the nation and his newsletter was in hot demand. In short, B. J. was a success.

Then, to B. J.'s even greater astonishment, Joyce sold her book. B. J. had no idea of the book's contents, but whatever they were, the publishing company was thrilled and promised big things for this new author, hereby known as Joyce Throughfro Maxwell. Throughfro was Joyce's maiden name, which she now claimed she'd always regretted forsaking at marriage because it sounded so *literary*, so *her*. (B. J. wondered if his mind was tricking him—he remembered how she'd leaped at the chance to dump it.)

But then, B. J.'s mind was becoming busier and busier these days:

... *The problem was, Your Honor* ...

B. J. began having frequent mental conversations with the judge who would preside over

his arraignment, presenting excuses that would be so persuasive, so heartrending, that he'd be let off with a warning *never to do it again*, which B. J. fervently promised—every single time he ran through the imaginary legal proceedings in his head. At least three times a day.

Guilt. Now that things had gotten better, *incredibly* better, B. J.'s conscience had returned and kicked into high gear. He arrived at the horrible determination that somehow, by selling the painting, he'd made an implicit deal with the Devil that material prosperity was worth more to him than anything else. More than his integrity. His honesty. His self-respect. His ... soul.

B. J. began to cut bloody notches into his jaw in the mornings from being unable to look at himself in the mirror while he shaved.

Joyce thought all this integrity stuff hilarious. She chuckled as she informed him that his mental struggles were going to work extremely well in her next book—which was, she added smugly, a comedy.

It didn't help that she often mused that they owed all their good fortune to that painting ... grinding the memory into B. J.'s aching head of how Mrs. Bachrach had told him, and

Brian had repeated, that B. J. had been her dearest, best friend. A man among cats . . . and thieves. So what if she'd left all her money to her cats, inadvertently enriching the rotten Dr. Sams? She'd done exactly what she wanted, and what she wanted was to leave everything to that cat hospital. She'd had faith in B. J.'s honesty, and where was that honesty now? Gone. Eaten up by greed. He was as bad as Sams.

One evening after Joyce had broiled B. J. a particularly tender swordfish steak, he brought up the subject. When Joyce had heard him out, she stated that he was insane. She called him a neurotic crackpot and emphasized her belief by letting him spend a chilly night in bed that reminded him of the old days. The good old days when he never cut himself shaving.

A few more days passed, but B. J. found that now every time someone new subscribed to his newsletter, his stomach hurt. Since subscription requests were flowing in, antacids became a steady diet, spoiling his enjoyment of Joyce's newfound cooking skills.

Time did nothing but reinforce his determination: he had to get the painting back. It wasn't his to sell or to profit from. Even if his current profit came from his own efforts, it was based on the

security bought by that painting. And if he forfeited all his good luck because of this new action, so be it. At least he wouldn't bleed to death someday from a cut throat.

But to find the painting, first he had to find Joe.

Since B. J.'s forte was research, he used logic. After some thought, he decided that a fellow like Joe, getting on in years, probably hadn't strayed too far from his home area to conduct his break-ins. First he called the jail to check whether Joe had gained entrance there since last seen. No Joe.

Remembering Joe's shrewd estimation of Joyce (and her coffee), B. J. next guessed that he probably had a strong affection for women—excluding wives. Bearing no resemblance to Brad Pitt as an aid to acquiring female companionship, and having made what B. J. considered somewhat relaxed lifestyle choices, Joe likely frequented nightspots that featured female entertainment. The kind that didn't cost much and involved no commitment. Places like that thrived a few miles down the highway, safely out of reach of village ordinances. B. J. decided to start his search there.

He picked the biggest place first, the one advertising the most exotic dancers. FLO's!, ex-

claimed the flashing purple neon.

With his heart in his throat and wire-rimmed glasses safely tucked in a pocket (for a more macho appearance), B. J. stepped into a stripper bar for the first time in his life. The noise! The percussion pounded his chest, the bass hummed in his knees, and all of it deafened him. The energy level was as high as the noise level, and he had to take a seat suddenly to orient himself.

"Hey, cutie! What can I get you to drink?" asked a girl so young he couldn't believe she should be allowed to work. But he asked for beer, and when she whirled to take his order to the bar, he stared dazedly at the shortest shorts he'd ever seen inadequately covering the roundest, cutest behind he'd ever seen.

A beer or so later, B. J. caught his head bobbing in time to the music. He discovered himself feeling more relaxed than he had in years. He was even smiling!

He was sternly reminding himself that his mission didn't include having a good time when the music came to an abrupt halt—interrupted by crashing cymbals.

An electric guitar let out a sinus-shattering riff. Then whining, grinding, rock music with a

slow throbbing beat filled the room, and a line of girls began snaking out from behind a curtain onto a stage. They wore high heels, a few sparkles, and little else. One after another they came out, and kept coming.

B. J.'s eyes snapped wide open, and without conscious decision, he picked up his beer and drifted, mesmerized, towards the last remaining seat at the bar. The bar stretched from one end of the stage like a long wide ribbon, making the shape of an exaggerated horseshoe in the vast room before rejoining the stage again at its opposite end. In minutes the first girl would pass right in front of B. J.'s beer.

And then they were here. Satin high heels in neon colors shifting and stepping, swiveling and tapping in front of B. J.'s tightly clutched beer mug—a slow march of female feet, slim ankles, and knotty, muscled calves. B. J.'s gaze was just daring to lift itself higher when a gnarled hand clamped onto his shoulder. B. J. nearly snapped his backbone, jumping from guilt.

"Man, I knew when I first laid eyes on you that you were a man I could get along with." The hot breath of Joe Alvione's hoarse chuckle tickled B. J.'s ear. He wrenched his gaze from

the swiveling, dipping knees to face Joe.

With his arm looped over B. J.'s shoulder, Joe wedged his thick body between B. J. and his neighbor, nearly shoving both from their stools. B. J. glared, but Joe exclaimed, "Don't waste those eyeballs on me, lookie there!" He pointed up, and B. J. followed his instructions.

Time lost all meaning for B. J. as the heavenly line backed and twisted, kicked and squatted, dipping perilously close to his glasses (which he'd replaced for clearer vision), pirouetting, then dipping again. The music screamed and whined and blended with B. J.'s heartbeat somehow. His mouth became dry, and he realized it was hanging open. He gulped down some beer and understood suddenly what "wetting your whistle" was all about.

When the last girl disappeared behind the curtain again, B. J. shrugged his aching neck and, remembering his image, removed his glasses. "How do they expect you to stare straight up all that time?"

"You managed all right," Joe said dryly. "You get it, don'tcha? Flo? Flo Ziegfeld? The guy who used to make all the beautiful girls dance in lines?"

B. J. stared at Joe blankly until his brain cells cooled down

and he could think. "You mean, Ziegfeld's Follies?"

"Yeah! Great, ain't it?"

B. J. gulped. "They're lucky he's dead, or he'd sue."

Joe howled with laughter.

Then B. J. explained what he wanted, and Joe didn't feel like laughing any more.

"You've lost your marbles, kid." He shook his head in grave concern. "You need to talk to somebody. Get counseling." He patted B. J. on the arm.

B. J. jerked his arm away. "You're going to help me out, or you're going to the police with me now, either dragged or walking, I don't care." He panted furiously through his nose.

Joe began patting B. J.'s chest. B. J. pushed his hands away. "What're you—"

"Oh, calm down." He found B. J.'s glasses and reinstalled them. "Now you look more like yourself. You shouldn't worry about impressing these guys. They don't care if you got eyes on your elbows." Making soothing conversation, he took B. J.'s arm, and they left the place without B. J.'s immediately registering the fact.

Suddenly B. J. realized he was sitting in the passenger seat of a pickup truck. "I'm being kidnapped! You're kidnapping me!"

"B. J., if I wanted to kidnap you, wouldn't I of knocked you out first or something? You're

screaming like a woman, for God's sake. Just shut up."

B. J. shut up.

"That's better. I'm takin' you to an expert."

"Your expert art fence?"

"Naw, an expert fixer. Relax. She'll get the bugs outa your brain for you. The price is right, too. She works for free."

"Free?"

"Yeah. By the by, how many beers you had tonight?"

"Uh—I don't remember."

"Cripes. Then just shut up."

B. J. shut up.

"Sit there, B. J., and don't say nothing until she asks." Joe pointed to a soft chair by the fireplace. When he was obeyed, he turned to Mrs. Risk.

"He's a nice enough fella, or I wouldn'ta brought 'im. Sorry about his beered-up condition, but it's kinda urgent. Do you want me to go or to wait?"

Mrs. Risk eyed him narrowly. "If you leave, how will Mr. Maxwell get home?"

"Oh, right. 'Course, his house ain't an awful long walk from here. He lives in those apartments this side o' Wyndham, by the school. The walk'd sober him some, too, before he gets home to that dragon of his."

Mrs. Risk considered the by now extremely alarmed B. J.

"He looks sober enough, Joe. Wait in the kitchen. Rachel left some butterscotch cookies on the counter."

Joe brightened. He bent towards B. J., said confidently, "Rachel, that's a friend o' Mrs. Risk's, now *there's* a gorgeous female! Puts them at Flo's to shame!" He disappeared around the corner.

She poured B. J. some tea from a pot that'd been steeping on the hearth. As he inhaled the slightly tart fragrance, he suddenly felt himself relax. Then, mysteriously, the urge to talk overwhelmed him. He told her everything.

Afterward he heaved a great sigh.

"Feel better?" asked Mrs. Risk.

"No," B. J. said passionately. "I realize more than ever that I've done a really bad thing."

"Yes, you have."

Joe wandered into the room, brushing crumbs from his broad front. B. J.'s eyes narrowed. "He steals for a *living*, yet he's a friend of yours? Who *are* you, anyway?"

Joe said, "Fine time to ask, after you spill your guts to the lady."

B. J. reddened. "I don't know what came over me."

Joe roared with laughter. "You won't be the last guy to say that where the Witch o'

Wyndham-by-the-Sea's concerned!"

B. J. pursed his lips. "That's you?"

Mrs. Risk nodded.

"Well, I've *heard* of you, of course. But I don't see . . . well, how can you help me?"

Joe grinned. "She's done some things you'd have a hard time believing. Helped *me*, once'r twice. No shame in it."

B. J. squirmed. "I wasn't feeling *shame*, I—uh . . ."

Mrs. Risk raised her eyebrows. "Perhaps you'd already decided on a course of action?"

"Well." He sat up straighter. "I thought Joe could tell me the name of his fence, and then I intended to ask the fence who his customer was . . ."

Joe's eyes popped wide. "And you thought that a bigtime art fence would just . . . *tell* you? Not if you was James Bond, with the Marine Corps to back you up." He wheezed in dismay. "Never mind the fact that if anybody revealed *any* info, me'n the fence both'd be out o' business. The *real* problem is, this particular fence, see, ain't a regular guy like you and me and Mrs. Risk here."

B. J. eyed Joe and Mrs. Risk, startled at the idea of considering either of them "regular." "Yes, well—"

Joe shuddered. "Nooooo, B. J. He'd skin your privates just for

findin' 'im, let alone talkin' to 'im. Mine'r crawlin' up inside my guts right now at just the thought of it. He ain't nobody to bother. That's why we need Mrs. Risk, you moron."

"I can do this myself, *you moron!*" B. J. leaped to his feet but swayed lightheadedly. Joe grabbed his arm to steady him.

"Just let the lady talk, okay? Sorry I called you a moron. You don't know no better, I realize that. Really. I'm sorry. Go on, Mrs. Risk. He's ready to listen."

Mrs. Risk considered B. J. carefully. "I don't think you're correct, Joe." She began to stride slowly back and forth in front of the two men. Finally she looked up. "Well, first let's discover who purchased your painting. There may be nothing I can do after all."

She picked up a phone and, turning her back to the men, spoke in a voice too low for them to make out the words.

Once again B. J. tried to speak.

"Shut up, will you?" snapped Joe.

B. J. snapped back, "You know, I'm getting sick and tired of being told to shut up."

Joe nodded sympathetically. "I don't blame you. Shut up anyway, just this one last time. Honest, you'll be glad you did."

Fuming, B. J. shut up.

Mrs. Risk turned around. She

wrote an address on a piece of paper and handed it to B. J. "Here's where your painting is hanging now."

B. J.'s mouth dropped open. "Wha—how—"

She smiled gently. "I deduced who the fence must be by Joe's fright, and from your description of the painting. Art fences specialize."

"And you got him to tell you—after what Joe said he was like?"

She nodded. "Now, if you'd like to listen—"

B. J. jumped up. "Hey, thanks. Joe's right. You've been a great help, but this's all I need. I can handle things from here myself . . ." Still muttering excitedly, he ran out the door.

As the door slammed behind him, Mrs. Risk looked at Joe. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. Thought he had more sense, but the poor guy—he lives with such stress." He shrugged. "You're a sport, an' I owe ya one. Hey, tell Rachel her cookies were outrageous, will ya?"

Later that night, freshly showered and sober, B. J. told the taxi to let him out a half block away from his destination, which turned out to be as close as the cab could get anyway. The neighborhood was choked with parked cars, mostly of the luxury class.

As he approached the man-

sion on foot, he saw that a party was under way. At this late hour most of the partygoers were already inside and having a terrific evening, judging by the music and laughter.

B. J. paused next to a dark blue Rolls. He worried how rich and powerful the man might be who owned a house like this but concluded finally that it didn't matter. Whoever it was had bought stolen property and was undoubtedly a crook—B. J. flushed in the darkness—at least as big a crook as he himself was for selling it.

He shivered nervously and almost turned and ran. But instead, somehow, he forced himself to slip through the nearest side door.

Inside, no one even glanced at him. He went upstairs, deciding to begin his search in the bedrooms. That's where he expected to find the fewest people, and his courage needed a rest.

When he first spotted the painting, he thought he was hallucinating—after all, he'd been obsessed for weeks with his need to find it. He'd taken a moment to use the master bedroom facilities, and while zipping himself afterward, he spotted it in the bathroom mirror on the wall in front of him. He whipped around with a gasp.

Then he gasped a second time. The steam from the show-

er, and from the bathtub—was this the way to treat a rare art treasure?! He had to get it out of here, no matter what else happened.

With indignation he tried to lift the heavy painting away from the wall, and tugged in vain. He frowned. Someone must have used *bolts* to attach it to the wall . . . then dimly he registered the thudding of running footsteps. It must have been wired to a well-monitored alarm system, he realized with resignation. Within seconds his arms were pinned tight by the grip of uniformed guards. Curious party guests had followed and were peering into the bathroom.

To B. J.'s surprise, the badges fastened to his guards' chests belonged to genuine policemen, not a hired security service. He gave the crowd of well-dressed witnesses a speculative glance and decided the time had arrived to confess. The thief couldn't deny evidence screwed tight to the wall of his own private bathroom!

Just as he reached the part about Joe Alvione fencing the painting, an older gentleman thrust his way to the front of the spectators. To B. J.'s stupefaction, it was State Appellate Court Judge Arthur Parmdell, fuming as if he owned the place.

At first B. J. thought to ask the judge's help in apprehending this high society criminal. But then the peculiarity of the expression on Parmdell's face began to filter through B. J.'s confusion. "This is *your* house!" he gasped. "You bought this painting!"

Judge Parmdell's eyes popped open wide—much the same way B. J.'s had.

Then B. J. got mad. He started yelling about "integrity of public office," and "receiving stolen goods," and how he'd come to retrieve the painting—

The guards began howling at B. J. to shut up, shut up, but B. J. decided he wasn't going to shut up any more for anyone and began yelling even louder . . .

The third time B. J. pronounced the words "stolen Old Master," the judge clutched his chest, croaked, "My senate campaign!" and fell into a heap on the cold tile floor.

One of the guards bent down, touched the judge's chest, then stood up hastily, saying in a hushed tone, "He's dead!"

The other guard gripped B. J.'s arm so tightly that B. J. squeaked. To his horror the first guard turned to him and growled into his face, "You killed the judge, you sumbitch! You're gonna fry!"

B. J. fainted.

B. J. emerged from unconsciousness to realize that he was sprawled—beltless, watch-and-wedding-ringless, shoelaceless, and with empty pockets—on a bare mattress thrown on a steel shelf in the Wyndham lockup. He pressed his forehead against the artfully etched cement block wall and moaned, “Oh, Joyce, what will happen to me now?”

“Maxwell, you awake? Visitor,” said the guard outside the barred door. B. J. looked up.

To his astonishment it was Mrs. Risk.

“I’m waiting here to be charged for murder, aren’t I?” he asked after a pause.

“It’s called ‘arraignment.’”

“I—I’m sorry about the judge...”

“Glad to hear it, Mr. Maxwell. Here, I’ve brought someone to see you.”

“Another visitor?” He turned lifeless eyes to the wall, uninterested.

She moved aside, and up stepped Brian McKee, Mrs. Bachrach’s lawyer.

B. J. heard a nervous throat clearing and looked around. “Brian? I—I hadn’t thought about hiring a lawyer, but I guess I ought—”

“Oh, I don’t do criminal cases, but uh—” Mrs. Risk prodded him with a sharp elbow. “I came

to tell you—” he took a deep breath and flushed bright puce. B. J. didn’t notice, his interest having been drawn again to the wall.

“Mr. McKee has some information that you should hear, Mr. Maxwell,” put in Mrs. Risk crisply. “Please pay attention.”

Brian licked his lips. “I’m sorry you’re in here—killing the judge and—uh, yeah. Anyway—the painting. I didn’t tell you because—why get you all upset over something that couldn’t be changed? I thought she’d already sold it, but Mrs. Risk says she gave it to you before her cruise. It’s—well, B. J.,” he gulped, “she really liked you—I like you, too, I don’t care what you did—”

B. J. slowly rose from his bunk, eyes narrowing. “What are you trying to tell me?”

Brian backed away. “That, uh, you didn’t need to feel so guilty for selling that painting.”

Grasping the bars, B. J. mashed his face as far through them as he could. “What? Why not?”

“Because, uh, she left it—to you.”

“In her *will*?”

“Uh-huh.”

“*But you didn’t—*”

“I know.” Brian looked like he might throw up at any second.

“*Why didn’t you tell me?*”

“Yeeeeeess. And then there’s

the question of why you didn't inform Mr. McKee that you had the painting in your possession, isn't there, Mr. Maxwell?"

B. J. gazed at Mrs. Risk as if just realizing at that moment that she was there. He wilted. "I—because I—"

"You were such a nice guy!" exclaimed Brian. "I couldn't stand the thought of seeing the disappointment on your face when I told you of the million or so you could have had if she hadn't sold it for that mangy hospital. You understand, don't you? Listen, my law firm is awfully upset with me, but I told them what a great guy you are and how you'd . . ."

"I'm not a great guy," interrupted B. J. "I guess even then I wanted to steal the painting. If I'd been really honest, I would've told you about it right away." He dropped his grip on the bars and shuffled back to the bunk. "I deserve to be here."

"B. J.?" a soft, feminine voice said.

B. J. looked up. Joyce was leaning against the bars, looking at him with uncharacteristic tears in her eyes.

"Joyce? I thought you'd have left me by now. Guess you've been right all along, I am a stupid jerk."

"No. You're a kind, wonderful, upright, and honest man, whom I didn't appreciate. I was the

jerk. Listen, B. J., listen . . . I was so full of guilt over not helping out with our finances that I couldn't live with myself. It ate me up inside, thinking how you were making all kinds of sacrifices for my career that hadn't even happened yet. Might not ever happen.

"When you write a book, who knows whether it's going to sell or not. For all I knew, I was going to be taking advantage of your kind nature for years without any end in sight."

She glanced tearfully at the witch. "I talked it all over with Mrs. Risk, and she made me realize that it was my insecurities that made me so mean, so greedy. I resented you for not doing better financially because I hated feeling so damned guilty!"

"It's all twisted, I know. You probably can't understand. I don't blame you . . ."

B. J. stood and hugged her through the bars. "Oh but I do!"

She sobbed, "You—you *do*?"

"You bet I do. I've learned a lot about guilt these last few weeks . . . and minutes."

"But, B. J., you shouldn't feel guilty at all! I goaded you into this mess. You only wanted to do the right thing all along. We could've made it without the money from the painting, one way or another. We would've thought of something."

"Listen, Joyce, I'd already—"

Mrs. Risk stepped forward. "As fascinating as all this is, you can sort out your joint guilt at another time. For now, let's get Mr. Maxwell out of here. Arthur?"

Judge Parmdell came from around the corner and instructed the attendant to unlock B. J.'s cell.

B. J. staggered back, shocked at the resurrection. "You—you're dead!"

"Oh, I have a few years left." Judge Parmdell smiled sheepishly. "I was always good on stage. Helps you in the courtroom to be able to act, you know. You'll find your painting on the desk outside, with your belt and the rest of your things."

"How—"

"How did Mrs. Risk manage this?" asked Judge Parmdell. "She's done more for the people in Wyndham, and beyond, than we could ever repay, Maxwell. I'm afraid I'm obliged to do anything she asks me to do."

Mrs. Risk gazed at him with a deceptively sweet smile. She added, "Especially since a bathroom *was* an awfully peculiar place to hang a Leonardo, wasn't it, Arthur?"

Judge Parmdell reddened but gamely returned her smile.

B. J. turned humbly to Mrs. Risk. "I should've listened to you, like Joe advised."

Mrs. Risk eyed a flushing Joyce. "Yes, well, I can understand your lack of faith in female acumen. However, I hope you'll both take a new attitude towards each other in the future."

B. J., quivering in gratitude, turned to the judge. "Sir, the painting's yours, you paid for it. Please keep it."

"Ah, no. Thank you anyway, son. It was stolen property when I bought it—although I didn't know that at the time!" he added quickly. "I really can't keep it."

"Then I'll pay you back."

Mrs. Risk smiled grimly. "That's very sweet, Mr. Maxwell, but Arthur will do nicely without a refund. I hope you now realize that money isn't the most important aspect of what something costs."

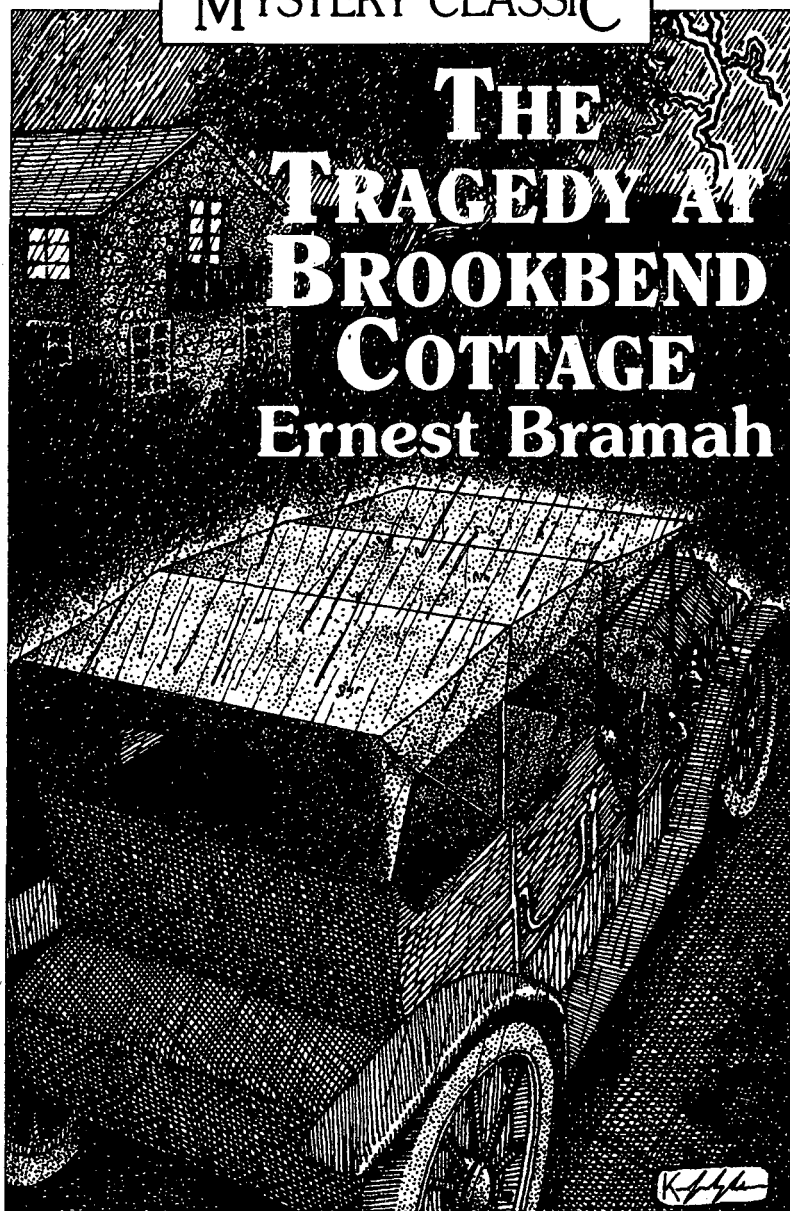
Judge Parmdell grinned at B. J. and shook his hand. "I hope you'll reward my assistance in this matter with your generous support in my bid for the senate?"

"Ttcha!" Mrs. Risk rolled her eyes.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE TRAGEDY AT BROOKBEND COTTAGE

Ernest Bramah



“**M**ax,” said Mr. Carlyle, when Parkinson had closed the door behind him, “this is Lieutenant Hollyer, whom you consented to see.”

“To hear,” corrected Carrados, smiling straight into the healthy and rather embarrassed face of the stranger before him. “Mr. Hollyer knows of my disability?”

“Mr. Carlyle told me,” said the young man, “but as a matter of fact, I had heard of you before, Mr. Carrados, from one of our men. It was in connection with the foundering of the *Ivan Saratov*.”

Carrados wagged his head in good-humored resignation.

“And the owners were sworn to inviolable secrecy!” he exclaimed. “Well, it is inevitable, I suppose. Not another scuttling case, Mr. Hollyer?”

“No, mine is quite a private matter,” replied the lieutenant. “My sister, Mrs. Creak—~~but~~ Mr. Carlyle would tell you better than I can. He knows all about it.”

“No, no; Carlyle is a professional. Let me have it in the rough, Mr. Hollyer. My ears are my eyes, you know.”

“Very well, sir. I can tell you what there is to tell, right enough, but I feel that when all’s said and done it must sound very little to another, although it seems important to me.”

“We have occasionally found trifles of significance ourselves,” said Carrados encouragingly. “Don’t let that deter you.”

This was the essence of Lieutenant Hollyer’s narrative:

“I have a sister, Millicent, who is married to a man called Creak. She is about twenty-eight now, and he is at least fifteen years older. Neither my mother (who has since died) nor I cared very much about Creak. We had nothing particular against him, except, perhaps, the moderate disparity of age, but none of us appeared to have anything in common. He was a dark, taciturn man, and his moody silence froze up conversation. As a result, of course, we didn’t see much of each other.”

“This, you must understand, was four or five years ago, Max,” interposed Mr. Carlyle officiously.

Carrados maintained an uncompromising silence. Mr. Carlyle blew his nose and contrived to impart a hurt significance into the operation. Then Lieutenant Hollyer continued:

“Millicent married Creak after a very short engagement. It was a frightfully subdued wedding—more like a funeral to me. The man professed to have no relations and apparently he had scarcely any

From Max Carrados by Ernest Bramah, published in 1914.

friends or business acquaintances. He was an agent for something or other and had an office off Holborn. I suppose he made a living out of it then, although we knew practically nothing of his private affairs, but I gather that it has been going down since, and I suspect that for the past few years they have been getting along almost entirely on Millicent's little income. You would like the particulars of that?"

"Please," assented Carrados.

"When our father died about seven years ago, he left three thousand pounds. It was invested in Canadian stock and brought in a little over a hundred a year. By his will my mother was to have the income of that for life, and on her death it was to pass to Millicent, subject to the payment of a lump sum of five hundred pounds to me. But my father privately suggested to me that if I should have no particular use for the money at the time, he would propose my letting Millicent have the income of it until I did want it, as she would not be particularly well off. You see, Mr. Carrados, a great deal more had been spent on my education and advancement than on her; I had my pay, and of course I could look out for myself better than a girl could."

"Quite so," agreed Carrados.

"Therefore I did nothing about that," continued the lieutenant. "Three years ago I was over again, but I did not see much of them. They were living in lodgings. That was the only time since the marriage that I have seen them until last week. In the meanwhile our mother died, and Millicent had been receiving her income. She wrote me several letters at the time. Otherwise we did not correspond much, but about a year ago she sent me their new address—Brookbend Cottage, Mulling Common—a house that they had taken. When I got two months' leave, I invited myself there as a matter of course, fully expecting to stay most of my time with them, but I made an excuse to get away after a week. The place was dismal and unendurable, the whole life and atmosphere indescribably depressing." He looked round with an instinct of caution, leaned forward earnestly, and dropped his voice. "Mr. Carrados, it is my absolute conviction that Creak is only waiting for a favorable opportunity to murder Millicent."

"Go on," said Carrados quietly. "A week of the depressing surroundings of Brookbend Cottage would not alone convince you of that, Mr. Hollyer."

"I am not so sure," declared Hollyer doubtfully. "There was a feel-

ing of suspicion and—before me—polite hatred that would have gone a good way towards it. All the same there was something more definite. Millicent told me this the day after I went there. There is no doubt that a few months ago Creake deliberately planned to poison her with some weed-killer. She told me the circumstances in a rather distressed moment, but afterwards she refused to speak of it again—even weakly denied it—and as a matter of fact, it was with the greatest difficulty that I could get her at any time to talk about her husband or his affairs. The gist of it was that she had the strongest suspicion that Creake doctored a bottle of stout which he expected she would drink for her supper when she was alone. The weedkiller, properly labeled but also in a beer bottle, was kept with other miscellaneous liquids in the same cupboard as the beer but on a high shelf. When he found that it had miscarried, he poured away the mixture, washed out the bottle, and put in the dregs from another. There is no doubt in my mind that if he had come back and found Millicent dead or dying he would have contrived it to appear that she had made a mistake in the dark and drunk some of the poison before she found out."

"Yes," assented Carrados. "The open way; the safe way."

"You must understand that they live in a very small style, Mr. Carrados, and Millicent is almost entirely in the man's power. The only servant they have is a woman who comes in for a few hours every day. The house is lonely and secluded. Creake is sometimes away for days and nights at a time, and Millicent, either through pride or indifference, seems to have dropped off all her old friends and have made no others. He might poison her, bury the body in the garden, and be a thousand miles away before anyone began even to inquire about her. What am I to do, Mr. Carrados?"

"He is less likely to try poison than some other means now," pondered Carrados. "That having failed, his wife will always be on her guard. He may know, or at least suspect, that others know. No . . . The common-sense precaution would be for your sister to leave the man, Mr. Hollyer. She will not?"

"No," admitted Hollyer, "she will not. I at once urged that." The young man struggled with some hesitation for a moment and then blurted out: "The fact is, Mr. Carrados, I don't understand Millicent. She is not the girl she was. She hates Creake and treats him with a silent contempt that eats into their lives like acid, and yet she is so jealous of him that she will let nothing short of death part them. It is a horrible life they lead. I stood it for a week, and I must

say, much as I dislike my brother-in-law, that he has something to put up with. If only he got into a passion like a man and killed her, it wouldn't be altogether incomprehensible."

"That does not concern us," said Carrados. "In a game of this kind one has to take sides, and we have taken ours. It remains for us to see that our side wins. You mentioned jealousy, Mr. Hollyer. Have you any idea whether Mrs. Creake has real ground for it?"

"I should have told you that," replied Lieutenant Hollyer. "I happened to strike up with a newspaper man whose office is in the same block as Creake's. When I mentioned the name, he grinned. 'Creake,' he said, 'oh, he's the man with the romantic typist, isn't he?' 'Well, he's my brother-in-law,' I replied. 'What about the typist?' Then the chap shut up like a knife. 'No, no,' he said, 'I didn't know he was married. I don't want to get mixed up in anything of that sort. I only said that he had a typist. Well, what of that? So have we; so has everyone.' There was nothing more to be got out of him, but the remark and the grin meant—well, about as usual, Mr. Carrados."

Carrados turned to his friend.

"I suppose you know all about the typist by now, Louis?"

"We have had her under efficient observation, Max," replied Mr. Carlyle with severe dignity.

"Is she unmarried?"

"Yes; so far as ordinary repute goes, she is."

"That is all that is essential for a moment. Mr. Hollyer opens up three excellent reasons why this man might wish to dispose of his wife. If we accept the suggestion of poisoning—though we have only a jealous woman's suspicion for it—we add to the wish the determination. Well, we will go forward on that. Have you got a photograph of Mr. Creake?"

The lieutenant took out his pocketbook.

"Mr. Carlyle asked me for one. Here is the best I could get."

Carrados rang the bell.

"This, Parkinson," he said when the man appeared, "is a photograph of a Mr. . . . what first name by the way?"

"Austin," put in Hollyer, who was following everything with a boyish mixture of excitement and subdued importance.

" . . . of a Mr. Austin Creake. I may require you to recognize him."

Parkinson glanced at the print and returned it to his master's hand.

"May I inquire if it is a recent photograph of the gentleman, sir?" he asked.

"About six years ago," said the lieutenant, taking in this new actor in the drama with frank curiosity. "But he is very little changed."

"Thank you, sir. I will endeavor to remember Mr. Creaker, sir."

Lieutenant Hollyer stood up as Parkinson left the room. The interview seemed to be at an end.

"Oh, there's one other matter," he remarked. "I am afraid that I did rather an unfortunate thing while I was at Brookbend. It seemed to me that as all Millicent's money would probably pass into Creaker's hands sooner or later I might as well have my five hundred pounds, if only to help her with afterwards. So I broached the subject and said that I should like to have it now, as I had an opportunity for investing."

"And you think?"

"It may possibly influence Creaker to act sooner than he otherwise might have done. He may have got possession of the principal even and find it very awkward to replace it."

"So much the better. If your sister is going to be murdered, it may as well be done next week as next year as far as I am concerned. Excuse my brutality, Mr. Hollyer, but this is simply a case to me, and I regard it strategically. Now, Mr. Carlyle's organization can look after Mrs. Creaker for a few weeks, but it cannot look after her forever. By increasing the immediate risk we diminish the permanent risk."

"I see," agreed Hollyer. "I'm awfully uneasy, but I'm entirely in your hands."

"Then we will give Mr. Creaker every inducement and every opportunity to get to work. Where are you staying now?"

"Just now with some friends at St. Albans."

"That is too far." The inscrutable eyes retained their tranquil depth, but a new quality of quickening interest in the voice made Mr. Carlyle forget the weight and burden of his ruffled dignity. "Give me a few minutes, please. The cigarettes are behind you, Mr. Hollyer." The blind man walked to the window and seemed to look over the cypress-shaded lawn. The lieutenant lit a cigarette, and Mr. Carlyle picked up *Punch*. Then Carrados turned round again.

"You are prepared to put your own arrangements aside?" he demanded of his visitor.

"Certainly."

"Very well. I want you to go down now—straight from here—to Brookbend Cottage. Tell your sister that your leave is unexpectedly cut short and that you sail tomorrow."

"The *Martian*?"

"No, no; the *Martian* doesn't sail. Look up the movements on your way there and pick out a boat that does. Say you are transferred. Add that you expect to be away only two or three months and that you really want the five hundred pounds by the time of your return. Don't stay in the house long, please."

"I understand, sir."

"St. Albans is too far. Make your excuse and get away from there today. Put up somewhere in town where you will be in reach of the telephone. Let Mr. Carlyle and myself know where you are. Keep out of Creak's way. I don't want actually to tie you down to the house, but we may require your services. We will let you know at the first sign of anything doing, and if there is nothing to be done we must release you."

"I don't mind that. Is there nothing more that I can do now?"

"Nothing. In going to Mr. Carlyle you have done the best thing possible; you have put your sister into the care of the shrewdest man in London." Whereat the object of this quite unexpected eulogy found himself becoming covered with modest confusion.

"Well, Max?" remarked Mr. Carlyle tentatively when they were alone.

"Well, Louis?"

"Of course it wasn't worthwhile rubbing it in before young Holler, but as a matter of fact, every single man carries the life of any other man—only one, mind you—in his hands, do what you will."

"Provided he doesn't bungle," acquiesced Carrados.

"Quite so."

"And also that he is absolutely reckless of the consequences."

"Of course."

"Two rather large provisos. Creak is obviously susceptible to both. Have you seen him?"

"No. As I told you, I put a man on to report his habits in town. Then, two days ago, as the case seemed to promise some interest—for he certainly is deeply involved with the typist, Max, and the thing might take a sensational turn at any time—I went down to Mulling Common myself. Although the house is lonely, it is on the electric tram route. You know the sort of market garden rurality that about a dozen miles out of London offers—alternate bricks and

cabbages. It was easy enough to get to know about Creake locally. He mixes with no one there, goes into town at irregular times but generally every day, and is reputed to be devilish hard to get money out of. Finally I made the acquaintance of an old fellow who used to do a day's gardening at Brookbend occasionally. He has a cottage and a garden of his own with a greenhouse, and the business cost me the price of a pound of tomatoes."

"Was it—a profitable investment?"

"As tomatoes, yes; as information, no. The old fellow had the fatal disadvantage from our point of view of laboring under a grievance. A few weeks ago Creake told him that he would not require him again, as he was going to do his own gardening in future."

"That is something, Louis."

"If only Creake was going to poison his wife with hyoscyamine and bury her, instead of blowing her up with a dynamite cartridge and claiming that it came in among the coal."

"True, true. Still . . ."

"However, the chatty old soul had a simple explanation for everything that Creake did. Creake was mad. He had even seen him flying a kite in his garden where it was bound to get wrecked among the trees. A lad of ten would have known better, he declared. And certainly the kite did get wrecked, for I saw it hanging over the road myself. But that a sane man should spend his time 'playing with a toy' was beyond him."

"A good many men have been flying kites of various kinds lately," said Carrados. "Is he interested in aviation?"

"I daresay. He appears to have some knowledge of scientific subjects. Now what do you want me to do, Max?"

"Will you do it?"

"Implicitly—subject to the usual reservations."

"Keep your man on Creake in town, and let me have his reports after you have seen them. Lunch with me here now. Phone up to your office that you are detained on unpleasant business, and then give the deserving Parkinson an afternoon off by looking after me while we take a motor run round Mulling Common. If we have time, we might go on to Brighton, feed at the Ship, and come back in the cool."

"Amiable and thrice lucky mortal," sighed Mr. Carlyle, his glance wandering round the room.

But as it happened, Brighton did not figure in that day's itinerary. It had been Carrados' intention merely to pass Brookbend Cot-

tage on this occasion, relying on his highly developed faculties, aided by Mr. Carlyle's description, to inform him of the surroundings. A hundred yards before they reached the house he had given an order to his chauffeur to drop into the lowest speed, and they were leisurely drawing past when a discovery by Mr. Carlyle modified their plans.

"By Jupiter!" that gentleman suddenly exclaimed; "there's a board up, Max. The place is to be let."

Carrados picked up the tube again. A couple of sentences passed, and the car stopped by the roadside, a score of paces past the limit of the garden. Mr. Carlyle took out his notebook and wrote down the address of a firm of house agents.

"You might raise the bonnet and have a look at the engines, Harris," said Carrados. "We want to be occupied here for a few minutes."

"This is sudden; Hollyer knew nothing of their leaving," remarked Mr. Carlyle.

"Probably not for three months yet. All the same, Louis, we will go on to the agents and get a card to view whether we use it today or not."

A thick hedge, in its summer dress effectively screening the house beyond from public view, lay between the garden and the road. Above the hedge showed an occasional shrub; at the corner nearest to the car a chestnut flourished. The wooden gate, once white, which they had passed was grimed and rickety. The road itself was still the unpretentious country lane that the advent of the electric car had found it. When Carrados had taken in these details, there seemed little else to notice. He was on the point of giving Harris the order to go on when his ear caught a trivial sound.

"Someone is coming out of the house, Louis," he warned his friend. "It may be Hollyer, but he ought to have gone by this time."

"I don't hear anyone," replied the other, but as he spoke, a door banged noisily, and Mr. Carlyle slipped into another seat and ensconced himself behind a copy of *The Globe*.

"Creake himself," he whispered across the car as a man appeared at the gate. "Hollyer was right; he is hardly changed. Waiting for a car, I suppose."

But a car very soon swung past them from the direction in which Mr. Creake was looking, and it did not interest him. For a minute or two longer he continued to look expectantly along the road. Then he walked slowly up the drive back to the house.

"We will give him five or ten minutes," decided Carrados. "Harris is behaving very naturally."

Before even the shorter period had run out they were repaid. A telegraph boy cycled leisurely along the road and, leaving his machine at the gate, went up to the cottage. Evidently there was no reply, for in less than a minute he was trundling past them back again. Round the bend an approaching tram clanged its bell noisily, and quickened by the warning sound, Mr. Creake again appeared, this time with a small portmanteau in his hand. With a backward glance he hurried on towards the next stopping place, and boarding the car as it slackened down, he was carried out of their knowledge.

"Very convenient of Mr. Creake," remarked Carrados with quiet satisfaction. "We will now get the order and go over the house in his absence. It might be useful to have a look at the wire as well."

"It might, Max," acquiesced Mr. Carlyle a little dryly. "But if it is, as it probably is, in Creake's pocket, how do you propose to get it?"

"By going to the post office, Louis,"

"Quite so. Have you ever tried to see a copy of a telegram addressed to someone else?"

"I don't think I have ever had occasion yet," admitted Carrados. "Have you?"

"In one or two cases I have perhaps been an accessory to the act. It is generally a matter either of extreme delicacy or considerable expenditure."

"Then for Hollyer's sake we will hope for the former here." And Mr. Carlyle smiled darkly and hinted that he was content to wait for a friendly revenge.

A little later, having left the car at the beginning of the straggling High Street, the two men called at the village post office. They had already visited the house agent and obtained an order to view Brookbend Cottage, declining with some difficulty the clerk's persistent offer to accompany them. The reason was soon forthcoming. "As a matter of fact," explained the young man, "the present tenant is under our notice to leave."

"Unsatisfactory, eh?" said Carrados encouragingly.

"He's a corker," admitted the clerk, responding to the friendly tone. "Fifteen months and not a doit of rent have we had. That's why I should have liked . . ."

"We will make every allowance," replied Carrados.

The post office occupied one side of a stationer's shop. It was not without some inward trepidation that Mr. Carlyle found himself

committed to the adventure. Carrados, on the other hand, was the personification of bland unconcern.

"You have just sent a telegram to Brookbend Cottage," he said to the young lady behind the brasswork lattice. "We think it may have come inaccurately and should like a repeat." He took out his purse. "What is the fee?"

The request evidently was not a common one. "Oh," said the girl uncertainly, "wait a minute, please." She turned to a pile of telegram duplicates behind the desk and ran a doubtful finger along the upper sheets. "I think this is all right. You want it repeated?"

"Please." Just a tinge of questioning surprise gave point to the courteous tone.

"It will be fourpence. If there is an error, the amount will be refunded."

Carrados put down his coin and received his change.

"Will it take long?" he inquired carelessly as he pulled on his glove.

"You will most likely get it within a quarter of an hour," she replied.

"Now you've done it," commented Mr. Carlyle as they walked back to their car. "How do you propose to get that telegram, Max?"

"Ask for it," was the laconic explanation.

And stripping the artifice of any elaboration, he simply asked for it and got it. The car, posted at a convenient bend in the road, gave him a warning note as the telegraph boy approached. Then Carrados took up a convincing attitude with his hand on the gate while Mr. Carlyle lent himself to the semblance of a departing friend. That was the inevitable impression when the boy rode up.

"Creak, Brookbend Cottage?" inquired Carrados, holding out his hand, and without a second thought the boy gave him the envelope and rode away on the assurance that there would be no reply.

"Someday, my friend," remarked Mr. Carlyle, looking nervously towards the unseen house, "your ingenuity will get you into a tight corner."

"Then my ingenuity must get me out again," was the retort. "Let us have our 'view' now. The telegram can wait."

An untidy workwoman took their order and left them standing at the door. Presently a lady whom they both knew to be Mrs. Creak appeared.

"You wish to see over the house?" she said in a voice that was ut-

terly devoid of any interest. Then, without waiting for a reply, she turned to the nearest door and threw it open.

"This is the drawing room," she said, standing aside.

They walked into a sparsely furnished, damp-smelling room and made a pretense of looking round, while Mrs. Creak remained silent and aloof.

"The dining room," she continued, crossing the narrow hall and opening another door.

Mr. Carlyle ventured a genial commonplace in the hope of inducing conversation. The result was not encouraging. Doubtless they would have gone through the house under the same frigid guidance had not Carrados been at fault in a way that Mr. Carlyle had never known him fail before. In crossing the hall he stumbled over a mat and almost fell.

"Pardon my clumsiness," he said to the lady. "I am, unfortunately, quite blind. But," he added, with a smile, to turn off the mishap, "even a blind man must have a house."

The man who had eyes was surprised to see a flood of color rush into Mrs. Creak's face.

"Blind!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I beg your pardon. Why did you not tell me? You might have fallen."

"I generally manage fairly well," he replied. "But of course in a strange house . . ."

She put her hand on his arm very lightly.

"You must let me guide you, just a little," she said.

The house, without being large, was full of passages and inconvenient turnings. Carrados asked an occasional question and found Mrs. Creak quite amiable without effusion. Mr. Carlyle followed them from room to room in the hope, though scarcely the expectation, of learning something that might be useful.

"This is the last one. It is the largest bedroom," said their guide. Only two of the upper rooms were fully furnished, and Mr. Carlyle at once saw, as Carrados knew without seeing, that this was the one which the Creaks occupied.

"A very pleasant outlook," declared Mr. Carlyle.

"Oh, I suppose so," admitted the lady vaguely. The room, in fact, looked over the leafy garden and the road beyond. It had a french window opening onto a small balcony, and to this, under the strange influence that always attracted him to light, Carrados walked.

"I expect that there is a certain amount of repair needed?" he said after standing there a moment.

"I am afraid there would be," she confessed.

"I ask because there is a sheet of metal on the floor here," he continued. "Now that, in an old house, spells dry rot to the wary observer."

"My husband said that the rain, which comes in a little under the window, was rotting the boards there," she replied. "He put that down recently. I had not noticed anything myself."

It was the first time she had mentioned her husband; Mr. Carlyle pricked up his ears.

"Ah, that is a less serious matter," said Carrados. "May I step out onto the balcony?"

"Oh yes, if you like to." Then, as he appeared to be fumbling at the catch, "Let me open it for you."

But the window was already open, and Carrados, facing the various points of the compass, took in the bearings.

"A sunny, sheltered corner," he remarked. "An ideal spot for a deck chair and a book."

She shrugged her shoulders half-contemptuously.

"I daresay," she replied, "but I never use it."

"Sometimes, surely," he persisted mildly. "It would be my favorite retreat. But then . . ."

"I was going to say that I had never even been out on it, but that would not be quite true. It has two uses for me, both equally romantic; I occasionally shake a duster from it, and when my husband returns late without his latchkey, he wakes me up, and I come out here and drop him mine."

Further revelation of Mr. Creak's nocturnal habits was cut off, greatly to Mr. Carlyle's annoyance, by a cough of unmistakable significance from the foot of the stairs. They had heard a trade cart drive up to the gate, a knock at the door, and the heavy-footed woman tramp along the hall.

"Excuse me a minute, please," said Mrs. Creak.

"Louis," said Carrados in a sharp whisper the moment they were alone, "stand against the door."

With extreme plausibility Mr. Carlyle began to admire a picture so situated that while he was there it was impossible to open the door more than a few inches. From that position he observed his confederate go through the curious procedure of kneeling down on the bedroom floor and for a full minute pressing his ear to the sheet

of metal that had already engaged his attention. Then he rose to his feet, nodded, dusted his trousers, and Mr. Carlyle moved to a less equivocal position.

"What a beautiful rose tree grows up your balcony," remarked Carrados, stepping into the room as Mrs. Creak returned. "I suppose you are very fond of gardening?"

"I detest it," she replied.

"But this *Glorie*, so carefully trained . . . ?"

"Is it?" she replied. "I think my husband was nailing it up recently." By some strange fatality Carrados' most aimless remarks seemed to involve the absent Mr. Creak. "Do you care to see the garden?"

The garden proved to be extensive and neglected. Behind the house was chiefly orchard. In front, some semblance of order had been kept up; here it was lawn and shrubbery, and the drive they had walked along. Two things interested Carrados: the soil at the foot of the balcony, which he declared on examination to be particularly suitable for roses, and the fine chestnut tree in the corner by the road.

As they walked back to the car, Mr. Carlyle lamented that they had learned so little of Creak's movements.

"Perhaps the telegram will tell us something," suggested Carrados. "Read it, Louis."

Mr. Carlyle cut open the envelope, glanced at the enclosure, and in spite of his disappointment could not restrain a chuckle.

"My poor Max," he explained, "you have put yourself to an amount of ingenious trouble for nothing. Creak is evidently taking a few days' holiday and prudently availed himself of the Meteorological Office forecast before going. Listen: 'Immediate prospect for London warm and settled. Further outlook cooler but fine.' Well, well; I did get a pound of tomatoes for my fourpence."

"You certainly scored there, Louis," admitted Carrados with humorous appreciation. "I wonder," he added speculatively, "whether it is Creak's peculiar taste usually to spend his weekend holiday in London."

"Eh?" exclaimed Mr. Carlyle, looking at the words again, "by gad, that's rum, Max. They go to Weston-super-Mare. Why on earth should he want to know about London?"

"I can make a guess, but before we are satisfied, I must come here again. Take another look at that kite, Louis. Are there a few yards of string hanging loose from it?"

"Yes, there are."

"Rather thick string—unusually thick for the purpose?"

"Yes, but how do you know?"

As they drove home again, Carrados explained, and Mr. Carlyle sat aghast, saying incredulously, "Good God, Max, is it possible?"

An hour later he was satisfied that it was possible. In reply to his inquiry someone in his office telephoned him the information that "they" had left Paddington by the four thirty for Weston.

It was more than a week after his introduction to Carrados that Lieutenant Hollyer had a summons to present himself at The Turrets again. He found Mr. Carlyle already there and the two friends awaiting his arrival.

"I stayed in all day after hearing from you this morning, Mr. Carrados," he said, shaking hands. "When I got your second message, I was all ready to walk straight out of the house. That's how I did it in the time. I hope everything is all right?"

"Excellent," replied Carrados. "You'd better have something before we start. We probably have a long and perhaps an exciting night before us."

"And certainly a wet one," assented the lieutenant. "It was thundering over Mulling way as I came along."

"That is why you are here," said his host. "We are waiting for a certain message before we start, and in the meantime you may as well understand what we expect to happen. As you saw, there is a thunderstorm coming on. The Meteorological Office morning forecast predicted it for the whole of London if the conditions remained. That was why I kept you in readiness. Within an hour it is now inevitable that we shall experience a deluge. Here and there damage will be done to trees and buildings; here and there a person will probably be struck and killed."

"Yes."

"It is Mr. Creake's intention that his wife should be among the victims."

"I don't exactly follow," said Hollyer, looking from one man to the other. "I quite admit that Creake would be immensely relieved if such a thing did happen, but the chance is surely an absurdly remote one."

"Yet unless we intervene it is precisely what a coroner's jury will decide has happened. Do you know whether your brother-in-law has any practical knowledge of electricity, Mr. Hollyer?"

"I cannot say. He was so reserved, and we really knew little of him . . ."

"Yet in 1896 an Austin Creaker contributed an article on 'Alternating Currents' to the American *Scientific World*. That would argue a fairly intimate acquaintanceship."

"But do you mean that he is going to direct a flash of lightning?"

"Only into the minds of the doctor who conducts the postmortem, and the coroner. This storm, the opportunity of which he had been awaiting for weeks, is merely the cloak to his act. The weapon which he has planned to use—scarcely less powerful than lightning but much more tractable—is the high voltage current of electricity that flows along the tram wire at his gate."

"Oh!" exclaimed Lieutenant Hollyer as the sudden revelation struck him.

"Sometime between eleven o'clock tonight—about the hour when your sister goes to bed—and one thirty in the morning—the time up to which he can rely on the current—Creaker will throw a stone up to the balcony window. Most of his preparation has long been made; it only remains for him to connect up a short length to the window handle and a longer one at the other end to tap the live wire. That done, he will wake his wife in the way I have said. The moment she moves the catch of the window—and he has carefully filed its parts to ensure perfect contact—she will be electrocuted as effectually as if she sat in the executioner's chair in Sing Sing prison."

"But what are we doing here!" exclaimed Hollyer, starting to his feet, pale and horrified. "It is past ten now, and anything may happen."

"Quite natural, Mr. Hollyer," said Carrados reassuringly, "but you need have no anxiety. Creaker is being watched, the house is being watched, and your sister is as safe as if she slept tonight in Windsor Castle. Be assured that whatever happens he will not be allowed to complete his scheme, but it is desirable to let him implicate himself to the fullest limit. Your brother-in-law, Mr. Hollyer, is a man with a peculiar capacity for taking pains."

"He is a damned coldblooded scoundrel!" exclaimed the young officer fiercely. "When I think of Millicent five years ago . . ."

"Well, for that matter, an enlightened nation has decided that electrocution is the most humane way of removing its superfluous citizens," suggested Carrados mildly. "He is certainly an ingenious-

minded gentleman. It is his misfortune that in Mr. Carlyle he was fated to be opposed by an even subtler brain . . .”

“No, no! Really, Max!” protested the embarrassed gentleman.

“Mr. Hollyer will be able to judge for himself when I tell him that it was Mr. Carlyle who first drew attention to the significance of the abandoned kite,” insisted Carrados firmly. “Then, of course, its object became plain to me—as indeed to anyone. For ten minutes perhaps, a wire must be carried from the overhead line to the chestnut tree. Creak has everything in his favor, but it is just within possibility that the driver of an inopportune train might notice the appendage. What of that? Why, for more than a week he has seen a derelict kite with its yards of trailing string hanging in the tree. A very calculating mind, Mr. Hollyer. It would be interesting to know what line of action Mr. Creak has mapped out for himself afterwards. I expect he has half a dozen artistic little touches up his sleeve. Possibly he would merely singe his wife’s hair, burn her feet with a red-hot poker, shiver the glass of the french window, and be content with that to let well alone. You see, lightning is so varied in its effects that whatever he did or did not do would be right. He is in the impregnable position of the body showing all the symptoms of death by lightning shock and nothing else but lightning to account for it—a dilated eye, heart contracted in systole, bloodless lungs shrunk to a third the normal weight, and all the rest of it. When he has removed a few outward traces of his work, Creak might quite safely ‘discover’ his dead wife and rush off for the nearest doctor. Or he may have decided to arrange a convincing alibi and creep away, leaving the discovery to another. We shall never know; he will make no confession.”

“I wish it was well over,” admitted Hollyer. “I’m not particularly jumpy, but this gives me a touch of the creeps.”

“Three more hours at the worst, lieutenant,” said Carrados cheerfully. “Aha, something is coming through now.”

He went to the telephone and received a message from one quarter; then made another connection and talked for a few minutes with someone else.

“Everything working smoothly,” he remarked between times over his shoulder. “Your sister has gone to bed, Mr. Hollyer.”

Then he turned to the house telephone and distributed his orders.

“So we,” he concluded, “must get up.”

By the time they were ready, a large closed motor car was wait-

ing. The lieutenant thought he recognized Parkinson in the well-swathed form beside the driver, but there was no temptation to linger for a second on the steps. Already the stinging rain had lashed the drive into the semblance of a frothy estuary; all round the lightning jagged its course through the incessant tremulous glow of more distant lightning, while the thunder only ceased its muttering to turn at close quarters and crackle viciously.

"One of the few things I regret missing," remarked Carrados tranquilly, "but I hear a good deal of color in it."

The car slushed its way down to the gate, lurched a little heavily across the dip into the road, and, steadying as it came up on the straight, began to hum contentedly along the deserted highway.

"We are not going direct?" suddenly inquired Hollyer after they had traveled perhaps half a dozen miles. The night was bewildering enough, but he had the sailor's gift for location.

"No; through Huns cott Green and then by a field path to the orchard at the back," replied Carrados. "Keep a sharp lookout for the man with the lantern about here, Harris," he called through the tube.

"Something flashing just ahead, sir," came the reply, and the car slowed down and stopped.

Carrados dropped the near window as a man in glistening waterproof stepped from the shelter of a lich-gate and approached.

"Inspector Beedel, sir," said the stranger, looking into the car.

"Quite right, inspector," said Carrados. "Get in."

"I have a man with me, sir."

"We can find room for him as well."

"We are very wet."

"So shall we all be soon."

The lieutenant changed his seat, and the two burly forms took places side by side. In less than five minutes the car stopped again, this time in a grassy country lane.

"Now we have to face it," announced Carrados. "The inspector will show us the way."

The car slid round and disappeared into the night while Beedel led the party to a stile in the hedge. A couple of fields brought them to the Brookbend boundary. There a figure stood out of the black foliage, exchanged a few words with their guide, and piloted them along the shadows of the orchard to the back door of the house.

"You will find a broken pane near the catch of the scullery window," said the blind man.

"Right, sir," replied the inspector. "I have it. Now who goes through?"

"Mr. Hollyer will open the door for us. I'm afraid you must take off your boots and all wet things, lieutenant. We cannot risk a single spot inside."

They waited until the back door opened, then each one divested himself in a similar manner and passed into the kitchen, where the remains of a fire still burned. The man from the orchard gathered together the discarded garments and disappeared again.

Carrados turned to the lieutenant.

"A rather delicate job for you now, Mr. Hollyer: I want you to go up to your sister, wake her, and get her into another room with as little fuss as possible. Tell her as much as you think fit, and let her understand that her very life depends on absolute stillness when she is alone. Don't be unduly hurried, but not a glimmer of a light, please."

Then minutes passed by the measure of the battered old alarm on the dresser shelf before the young man returned.

"I've had rather a time of it," he reported with a nervous laugh, "but I think it will be all right now. She is in the spare room."

"Then we will take our places. You and Parkinson come with me to the bedroom. Inspector, you have your own arrangements. Mr. Carlyle will be with you."

They dispersed silently about the house. Hollyer glanced apprehensively at the door of the spare room as they passed it, but within all was as quiet as the grave. Their room lay at the other end of the passage.

"You may as well take your place in the bed now, Hollyer," directed Carrados when they were inside and the door closed. "Keep well down among the clothes. Creak has to get up on the balcony, you know, and he will probably peep through the window, but he dare come no farther. Then when he begins to throw up stones slip on this dressing gown of your sister's. I'll tell you what to do after."

The next sixty minutes drew out into the longest hour that the lieutenant had ever known. Occasionally he heard a whisper pass between the two men who stood behind the window curtains, but he could see nothing. Then Carrados threw a guarded remark in his direction.

"He is in the garden now."

Something scraped slightly against the outer wall. But the night was full of wilder sounds, and in the house the furniture and the

boards creaked and sprung between the yawling of the wind among the chimneys, the rattle of the thunder, and the pelting of the rain. It was a time to quicken the steadiest pulse, and when the crucial moment came, when a pebble suddenly rang against the pane with a sound that the tense waiting magnified into a shivering crash, Hollyer leaped from the bed on the instant.

"Easy, easy," warned Carrados feelingly. "We will wait for another knock." He passed something across. "Here is a rubber glove. I have cut the wire, but you had better put it on. Stand just for a moment at the window, move the catch so that it can blow open a little, and drop immediately. Now."

Another stone had rattled against the glass. For Hollyer to go through his part was the work merely of seconds, and with a few touches Carrados spread the dressing gown to more effective disguise about the extended form. But an unforeseen and in the circumstances rather horrible interval followed, for Creak, in accordance with some detail of his never-revealed plan, continued to shower missile after missile against the panes until even the unimpressible Parkinson shivered.

"The last act," whispered Carrados a moment after the throwing had ceased. "He has gone round to the back. Keep as you are. We take cover now." He pressed behind the arras of an extemporized wardrobe, and the spirit of emptiness and desolation seemed once more to reign over the lonely house.

From half a dozen places of concealment ears were straining to catch the first guiding sound. He moved very stealthily, burdened perhaps by some strange scruple in the presence of the tragedy that he had not feared to contrive, paused for a moment at the bedroom door, then opened it very quietly, and in the fickle light read the consummation of his hopes.

"At last!" they heard the sharp whisper drawn from his relief. "At last!"

He took another step, and two shadows seemed to fall upon him from behind, one on either side. With primitive instinct a cry of terror and surprise escaped him as he made a desperate movement to wrench himself free, and for a short second he almost succeeded in dragging one hand into a pocket. Then his wrists slowly came together, and the handcuffs closed.

"I am Inspector Beedel," said the man on his right side. "You are charged with the attempted murder of your wife, Millicent Creak."

"You are mad," retorted the miserable creature, falling into a desperate calmness. "She has been struck by lightning."

"No, you blackguard, she hasn't," wrathfully exclaimed his brother-in-law, jumping up. "Would you like to see her?"

"I also have to warn you," continued the inspector impassively, "that anything you say may be used as evidence against you."

A startled cry from the farthest end of the passage arrested their attention.

"Mr. Carrados," called Hollyer, "oh, come at once."

At the open door of the other bedroom stood the lieutenant, his eyes still turned towards something in the room beyond, a little empty bottle in his hand.

"Dead!" he exclaimed tragically, with a sob, "with this beside her. Dead just when she would have been free of the brute."

The blind man passed into the room, sniffed the air, and laid a gentle hand on the pulseless heart.

"Yes," he replied. "That, Hollyer, does not always appeal to the woman, strange to say."

SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":

The student who stole old Professor Hathaway's first edition—and also the diamonds from Quality Jewelers—was Frank Hawkins, the biology major from Utah.

STUDENT	MAJOR	WEARING	HOME
Arthur Jackson	chemistry	tan sport coat	South Carolina
Bertram Kelvin	art	white sweater	Wisconsin
Charles Lambert	engineering	black sweater	Tennessee
Donald Ingram	pharmacy	brown sweater	Virginia
Edward Graves	dentistry	tweed jacket	Texas
Frank Hawkins	biology	blue blazer	Utah

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Murder mysteries are always about sin in some form, but in her latest paperback original featuring Sophie Greenway, author Ellen Hart posits that **The Oldest Sin** (Ballantine, \$5.99) is eating. Sophie and her husband Bram, a radio talk show host, find themselves managing the old and elegant Maxfield Hotel in downtown St. Paul. For food critic Sophie especially, overseeing the Maxfield's outstanding restaurants should be a form of heaven. But paradise on earth is more myth than reality: in her first week the hotel is host to two very disparate groups. One is an evangelical organization to which a young Sophie once belonged, even attending their Bible college in California; a college chum married the founder's son. Three other college roommates left the church to form the other group at the Maxfield, a national support group for women. Add to this recipe the death of a sixth college roommate, who died way back then under suspicious circumstances and you have a potentially poisonous brew. Hart is a master at characters and relationships, and both the fundamentalism and the food add lots of spice to this satisfying meal of a mystery.

Aunt Dimity is back; this time author Nancy Atherton's whimsical Girl Scout of the ether has appointed herself guardian angel to an entire family of eccentrics, whose cousinly connections span an ocean. After her whirlwind romance in the series' debut novel, Lori has now been married two years to her Prince Charming, Bill Willis. Unfortunately, she's discovered that as the wife of the junior partner in an old Boston law firm, she's actually married to an oft-absent lover who's even more firmly married to his job. When Lori and Bill's second honeymoon trip to England starts, in fact, she's

(continued on page 158)

THE STORY THAT WON

The October Mysterious Photographs go to John F. Besnard of Cross of Sacramento, California; Roena R. Hensler of Daly of Burlington, Ontario, Ann Arbor, Michigan; Jane sin; Judy Shenk of Aberdeen, Maryland; Nils V. Bockmann of Centerville, Massachusetts; R. Christopher Dempsey of Jacksonville, Florida; and Pat Christensen of Springerville, Arizona.



tograph contest was won by Michigan. Honorable men- Irvine, California; Alfred W. nia; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Monticello, Illinois; Vicki A. Canada; Robert Kesling of Umnus of La Crosse, Wisconsin;

William F. Smith, Garden Grove, Calif.

A SIGN OF TIMES by Richard N. Brush

St. Ignace normally is a quiet town in late fall, no one left but locals; however, a string of events would change all that.

It all started early one Saturday morning. The local sheriff received a call on his mobile phone. Peculiar as it was, the caller simply stated, "Open house, Lakeside Drive." Moments later a large explosion was heard by neighbors. The sheriff arrived to find Mr. Brunt's ice shanty blown to pieces. By it was a sign: OPEN HOUSE.

An hour later, another call: "Beware of dog on Maple Street." Sheriff Cobb arrived to find Mrs. Flannerey's poodle unidentifiable. Atop him was tossed a sign: BEWARE OF DOG.

Cobb became worried—two explosions in such a short period. Feverishly he patrolled the streets of the small Michigan Upper Peninsula town. This person had to be stopped immediately.

Then another call: "Elevator out." He knew the only elevator in town was at the retirement building, right around the corner. Just as he hung up the phone, *boom!* Sifting through the wreckage, another sign: ELEVATOR OUT. Luckily it was bingo night at the VFW, and no one was hurt.

Cobb knew things were building in severity. He sped out of town and headed for Mackinaw City. He knew a retired FBI agent there who would help.

About halfway over the Mackinaw Bridge his phone rang. Cobb began to sweat. All the caller said was, "Caution, bridge out."

(continued from page 156)

actually in the company of Bill's father rather than the groom. Thus Lori's spiritual nanny begins her task in **Aunt Dimity's Good Deed** (Viking, \$20.95). If charm is your cup of tea, get ready to pile on the clotted cream and feast with Atherton's third book in this offbeat series.

Some Sherlock Holmes fans spurn all pastiches; some can never get enough of the London sleuth's adventures. I fall into the latter group and was entertained by Larry Millett's **Sherlock Holmes and the Red Demon** (Viking, \$22.95). Holmes is offered a fabulous sum to travel to the booming city of St. Paul to undertake an assignment for fabled railroad baron James J. Hill. Someone is sending threatening letters to Hill, and there have been several incidents of arson along his lines in drought-stricken northern Minnesota, where a fire could prove catastrophic to both property and life. Thus Holmes and Watson travel to the rough-and-ready towns of the north woods to try to catch a madman. Millett is the author of several books on Minnesota history, and he has positioned the famous duo at a scene that still blazes in the region's lore.

Dick Francis's latest, **To the Hilt** (Putnam, \$24.95), plunges the reader into a world of high finance and embezzlement, art and ancient family treasures, and (naturally) thoroughbred horses. Twenty-nine-year-old Alex Kinloch is a reclusive artist, happily working in an isolated cabin on his uncle's huge estate, when he's abruptly drafted by his family to come to their rescue. His stepfather is ill, his mother is terrified, and the company his stepfather built is on the verge of collapse after huge losses. There are thrills, twists, and very clever financial derring-do by Alex and the team he manages to forge. Then he's got to figure out a way to keep his uncle's prized family heirloom out of the hands of National Trust zealots. Francis is in high dudgeon and his fans should be appreciative.

Matt Cobb, William L. DeAndrea's network vice-president and troubleshooter, is on indefinite leave of absence from his corporate duties in New York to spend time with his girlfriend Roxanne. As the latter also happens to be the network's largest stockholder, taking time off from work wasn't all that difficult to arrange. Or was it?—the couple has barely begun to settle into their new British digs when Matt is drawn into a situation brewing at his network's British counterpart. Cobb, DeAndrea's series character, is an endearing hero with a quick tongue, and readers should enjoy spending time with him in **Killed in the Fog** (Simon & Schuster, \$21).

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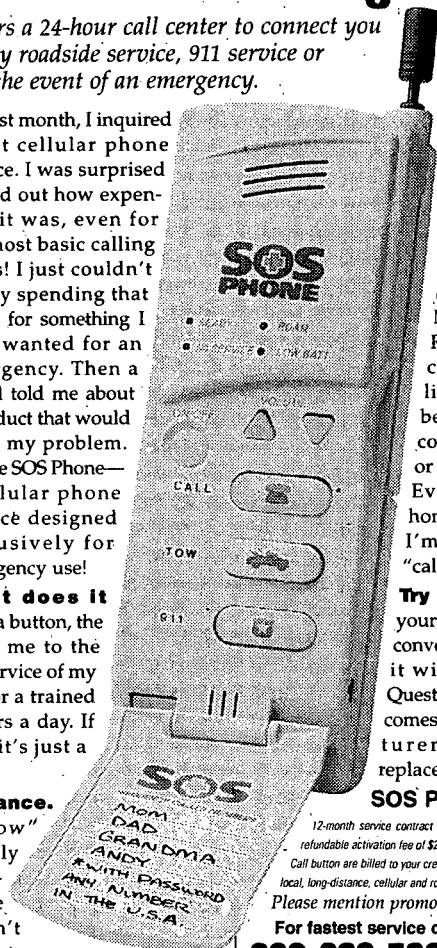
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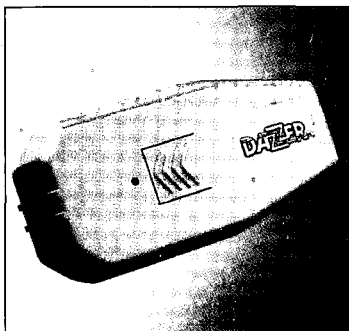
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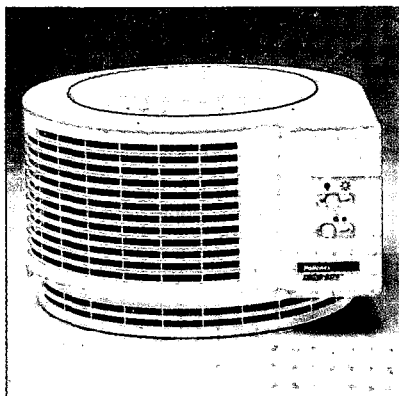
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